Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei

Sabah (Chapter)

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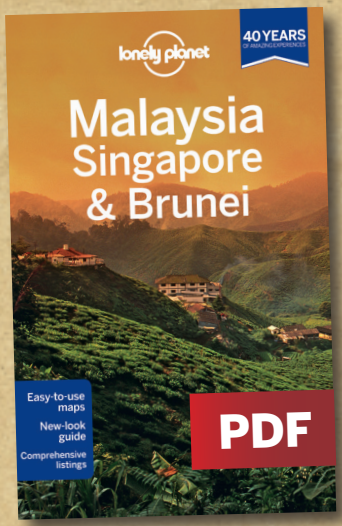

Coverage includes: Kota Kinabalu, Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park, Northwestern Sabah, Mt Kinabalu & Kinabalu National Park, Northwest Coast, Offshore Islands, Eastern Sabah, Sandakan, Sepilok, Sandakan Archipelago, Sungai Kinabatangan, Lahad Datu, Danum Valley, Conservation Area, Tabin Wildlife Reserve, Semporna, Semporna Archipelago, Tawau, Tawau Hills Park, Maliau Basin Conservation Area, Southwestern Sabah, The Interior, Beaufort Division, Pulau Tiga National Park and Pulau Labuan.

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Sabah

POP 3.39 MILLION / AREA 76,115 SQ KM

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Why Go?

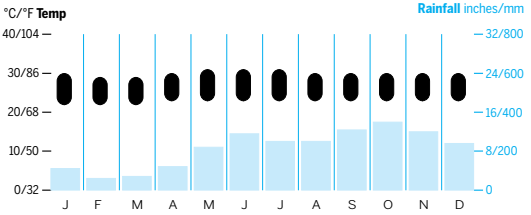
Sabah's beauty is quite simply gut-wrenching. This is one of the most physically stunning places on Earth, a land of deep green jungle, craggy mountains and shockingly blue ocean that all seems to collide into one moving, magnificent vista.

It's a land for adventure enthusiasts and yet, we must stress, not only adventure enthusiasts. Many treks around Mt Kinabalu, for example, really consist of vigorous hikes, jaunts you want to be fit to attempt, but don't need to be in Olympic shape to finish. Similarly, the diving in East Sabah – some of the best in the world – is easily accessible to beginners. And anyone can sit on a boat and appreciate the majesty of spotting clever lizards, prowling civets, doe-eyed loris and great ginger orang-utans in the wild.

In addition, there is a thriving yet laid-back culture here. Sabah's citizens are wonderful: cosmopolitan, friendly, famously relaxed folks who are quick to laugh and slow to rile. Their good-humoured presence is the perfect accompaniment to the awe-inspiring scenery of their home.

When to Go

Kota Kinabalu



Jan–Apr A dry, pleasant time, exploding with celebrations for Chinese New Year.

Mar–Jul The water calms; this is the best time for diving.

Jun–Sep Hot and often (but definitely not always) rainy.

Sabah Highlights

1 Admiring the sea turtles among the **Semporna Archipelago's** (p359) reefs

2 Hoofing it over pitcher plants and granite moonscapes for the ultimate Bornean sunrise atop **Mt Kinabalu** (p325)

3 Breathing in the air of an actual virgin rainforest in the **Maliau Basin Conservation Area** (p367)

4 Watching orang-utans in **Sepilok** (p343)

5 Discovering the hidden beaches of northern Borneo near **Kudat** (p335)

6 Floating down a river through primary jungle to the Batu Punggul rock formation in **Sapulot** (p371)

7 Enjoying the nightlife and eating opportunities of **Kota Kinabalu** (p314)

8 Staying in a home stay and spotting primates from a boat on the **Sungai Kinabatangan** (p352)

KOTA KINABALU

POP 630,000

We realise you almost certainly didn't come to Sabah for the urban scene, but you have to book permits somewhere, you gotta sleep after climbing Mt Kinabalu/diving in Sipadan/exploring the jungle etc, and you need some place to connect to onward travel, and KK, as everyone calls it, is a good place (sometimes the only place) to do all of the above. The centre is walkable. The population is a spicy mix of expats, Chinese, indigenous Kadazan and of course, Malays. The food is good – surprisingly good, given you're in Malaysia's hinterlands. Nightlife is fun, a testament to Sabah's laid-back approach to life; there aren't a lot of bars. The downside is out of control construction; KK desperately seems to want to answer the question, 'How many empty malls can we build in one city?', but past this one demerit, it's hard not to love this town.

Sights & Activities

CITY CENTRE & WATERFRONT

Night Market MARKET

(Map p308; Jln Tun Fuad Stephens; late afternoon-11pm) KK's main market is a place of delicious contrasts. Huddled beneath the imposing Le Meridien, the market is divided into two main sections: the southwest end is given over mostly to produce, while the northeast end (the area around the main entrance) is a huge hawker centre where you can eat your way right through the entire Malay gastronomy. A fish-and-food market extends to the waterfront; the closer you get to the ocean, the more the scent of salt water, death, blood and spices envelops you – an oddly intoxicating experience. If you've never seen a proper Southeast Asian market, this place will be a revelation.

Signal Hill LANDMARK

(Map p308) There's a UFO-like observation pavilion on this hill at the eastern edge of the city centre. Come here to escape the traffic and get another take on the squatters' stilt village at Pulau Gaya . The view is best as the sun sets over the islands. From the top, it's also possible to hike down to the Wetland Centre on the other side, but it's a longer way than it looks – don't try this if it's getting dark, as the walk can take up to two hours. Near here are some shells of unfinished building sites that were rumored to be haunted; the ghosts drove away the construction crews, presumably because they liked the idea of ugly concrete foundations overlooking KK.

ANIMAL ALERT

During KK's big Sunday Market, animals lovers may want to stay away from the market area where Jln Gaya intersects Beach Street; pet kittens and puppies are put out for sale in mesh cages and they don't look happy in the midday heat. Locals don't seem to mind, and to be fair, most vendors try to provide water and shade for the animals, but many Western travellers are put off by the sight.

Atkinson Clock Tower LANDMARK

(Map p308) The modest timepiece at the foot of the hill is one of the only structures to survive the Allied bombing of Jesselton in 1945. It's a square, 15.7m-high wooden structure that was completed in 1905 and named after the first district officer of the town, FG Atkinson, who died of malaria aged 28.

Central Market MARKET

(Map p308; Jln Tun Fuad Stephens; 6.30am-6pm) The Central Market is fun to wander about, and a nice spot for people watching as locals transact their daily business. Nearby, the **Handicraft Market** (Filipino Market; Jln Tun Fuad Stephens; 10am-6pm) is a good place to shop for inexpensive souvenirs. Offerings include pearls, textiles, seashell crafts, jewellery and bamboo goods, some from the Philippines, some from Malaysia and some from other parts of Asia. Needless to say, bargaining is a must.

KK Heritage Walk WALKING TOUR

(www.kkheritagewalk.com; admission RM200; walks 9am Tue & Thu) This two-hour tour, which can be booked through any of KK's many tour operators (just ask at your hotel front desk), explores colonial KK and its hidden delights. Stops include Chinese herbal shops, bulk produce stalls, a *kopitiam* (coffee shop), and Jln Gaya (known as Bond St when the British were in charge). There's also a quirky treasure hunt at the end leading tourists to the Jesselton Hotel. Guides speak English, Chinese and Bahasa Malaysia.

Sunday Market MARKET
(Map p308; Jln Gaya; ⏲7am-3pm Sun) On Sundays, a lively Chinese street fair takes over the entire length of Jln Gaya. It's a pretty manic scene and a perfect spot for souvenir shopping, but animal lovers may want to avoid some sections.

BEYOND THE CITY CENTRE

Some of KK's best attractions are located beyond the city centre, and it's well worth putting in the effort to check them out.

Sabah Museum MUSEUM
(☎253199; www.museum.sabah.gov.my; Jln Muzium; admission RM20; ⏲9am-5pm Sat-Thu; P) Centred on a modern four-storey structure inspired by the longhouses of the Rungus and Murut tribes, this is the best place to go in KK for an introduction to Sabah's ethnicities and environments. It's slightly south of the city centre, on the hilly corner of Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman and Jln Penampang.

In the main building there are good permanent collections of tribal and historical artefacts including ceramics and exhibits of flora and fauna – some dusty, others well presented (including a centrepiece whale skeleton). The prehistory gallery has a replica limestone cave, in case you don't make it to any of the real ones. In the gardens, the **Heritage Village** offers the chance to wander round examples of traditional tribal dwellings, including Kadazan bamboo houses and a Chinese farmhouse, all nicely set on a lily-pad lake.

The adjoining **Science & Education Centre** has an informative exhibition on the petroleum industry, from drilling to refining and processing. The **Sabah Art Gallery** features regular shows and exhibitions by local artists. If you're heading east after KK, keep hold of your admission ticket – it will also allow you entry to Agnes Keith House in Sandakan.

FIND YOUR WAY IN KK

Downtown KK is a dense grid of concrete buildings nestled between the waterfront and a range of low, forested hills to the east. It's compact, walkable and easy to navigate – most of the restaurants, markets, accommodation, tourist offices and tour operators are located here. Transport terminals bookend the city on either side.

Mari Mari Cultural Village MUSEUM
(☎019-820 4921; www.traversetours.com/culturalvillage.php; Jln Kiansom; adult/child RM160/140; P) Mari Mari is an entertaining combination of semi-corny and semi-educational. It's supposed to offer insight into the living cultures of Sabah via a three-hour show-tour (beginning at 10am, 3pm and 7pm), which winds through the jungle passing various tribal dwellings along the way. At each stop, tourists learn about indigenous folkways and can try their hand at bamboo cooking, rice-wine making (and drinking!), fire starting, tattooing, blowpipe shooting etc. A short dance recital and meal are included in the visit – the centre must be notified of any dietary restrictions in advance. A trip to the cultural village can be combined with a white-water rafting tour; contact Riverbug for more information. The village is a 20-minute to 30-minute drive north of central KK, so most people visit it on a package tour, but if you come on your own the admission is RM80/70 for adults/children.

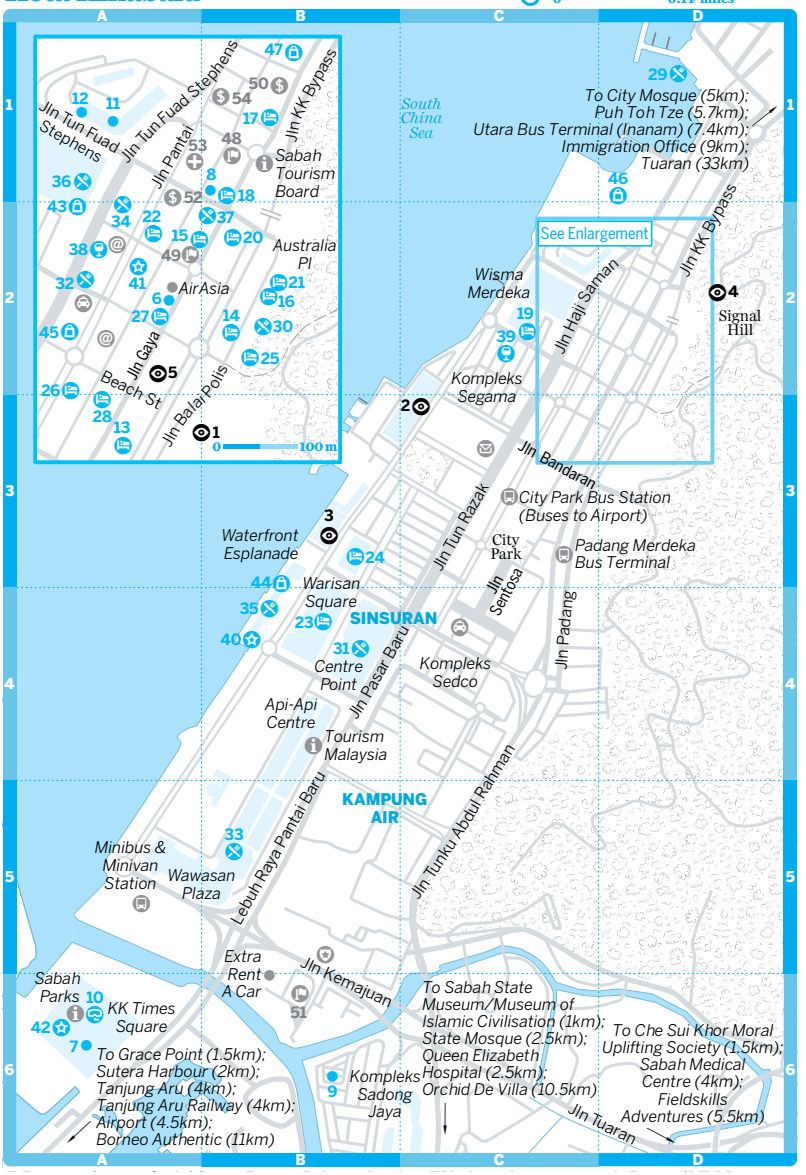
Rather than portraying living cultures, Mari Mari sort of freezes local ethnic groups into museum pieces. No one is dressing in

THE SOUTHSIDE CONNECTION

A paved road makes a frowning arc from KK to Tawau, passing Mt Kinabalu, Sepilok, Sandakan, Lahad Datu and Semporna (the gateway to Sipadan) along the way. It takes around 10 hours to complete the circuit.

Getting from KK to Tawau via the northern half of the island, via a big frown, is easy. Doing the smile side of the loop (going back to KK through the south from Tawau): not so much. The road here is not entirely paved, but there's at least finely crushed gravel the whole way through. A 2WD or even motorbike can make the drive, but drive carefully. An infrastructure of public buses does not yet exist here; minivans occasionally ran this stretch of road, but only when needed by logging camps. If you can get a lift to Keningau, the rest of the journey to KK is a breeze.

Kota Kinabalu



loincloths and feathers in Sabah, except maybe in the very deepest, remote interior. The Rungus and Murut may live in longhouses, but many of those longhouses have satellite television and air-con, and they hunt with guns, not blowpipes.

There is also a small waterfall – **Kiansom Waterfall** (admission RM1; ⏲ dawn-dusk) – about 400m beyond the cultural village, which is easily accessible by private transport or on foot. The area around the cascade lends itself well to swimming and

Kota Kinabalu

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3 Night Market B3
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21 Kinabalu Backpackers B2
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52 Maybank A1
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it's a great place to cool off after a visit to Mari Mari.

Lok Kawi Wildlife Park
ZOO

(☎765710; www.lokkawiwildlifepark.com; Jln Penampang; adult/child RM20/10; ⏲9.30am-5.30pm, last entry at 4:30pm; P) If you'd like to check out the orang-utans but won't make it out to Sepilok or the Kinabatangan, a visit to this wildlife park is highly recommended, especially for those with children in tow. There are plenty of other animals as well, from tarsiers to Sumatran rhinos. Don't miss the giant aviary at the top of the hill, with its ominous warning sign 'beware of attacking birds'.

It's best to arrive by 9.50am at the latest – feedings take place throughout the park at 10am. After the various feedings, an interactive show takes place at the stage around 11.15am everyday. After feeding time, most of the animals take their daily siesta – only the

humans are silly enough to stay out in the scorching midday sun.

The 17B minibus goes to Lok Kawi (RM2). Visitors with a private vehicle can access the park via the Papar–Penampang road or the Putatan–Papar road. Travel agents offer half-day tours, or you can hire a taxi, which will cost around RM150, including a two-hour wait.

Monsopiad Cultural Village MUSEUM

(☎774337; www.monsopiad.com; admission adult/student/child RM75/50/free; ⏲9am-5pm; P) On the banks of Sungai Moyog, Monsopiad is named after a legendary warrior and head-hunter, whose direct descendants established this private heritage centre in 1996. The highlight is the House of Skulls, which supposedly contains the ancient crania of Monsopiad's unfortunate enemies, as well as artefacts illustrating native rituals from the time when the *bobolian* (priest) was the most important figure in the community.

Many tour companies include Monsopiad on local itineraries. To get here independently, take a bus from central KK to Donggongon (RM1.50), where you can catch a minivan to the cultural village (RM1). You can also take a taxi or charter a minivan direct from KK for around RM40.

Kota Kinabalu Wetland Centre MUSEUM

(☎246955; www.sabahwetlands.org; Jln Bukit Bendera Upper; adult/child RM10/5; ⏲8am-6pm Tue-Sun; P) This spot encompasses the last 24 hectares of a mangrove swamp that once stretched across what is now KK. A series of wooden walkways leads into a wetland rife with fiddler crabs, mangrove crabs, mud lobsters, mudskippers, skinks, turtles, water monitors and the adorably turd-like mangrove slug, among other swamp fauna (sadly, there are also plastic bottles). For many, the big attraction is a stunning variety of migratory birds, some from as far away as Siberia. The walkway ends at a spot that looks out over a flat marshscape that would feel virgin were it not for the high rise buildings behind it. Staff are cheerful but not always that helpful.

To get here, head north on Jln Fuad Stephens (the main road north out of town; in town it's also called Jln KK Bypass) and follow it as it curves around the coast. You'll then turn right at Jln Istidat and follow that for about 1km; signs for the Wetland Centre will be on your right.

Chinese Temples CHINESE TEMPLE

(Jln Tuaran; P) The main road north to Tuaran runs past some impressive Chinese temples.

Che Sui Khor Moral Uplifting Society

About four minutes north of KK, this complex is anchored by an 11-storey pagoda that shimmers in orange and green. Tourists can't enter the actual pagoda, but the friendly members of the society don't mind you poking around the rest of their library. The Society espouses believing in the best Islam, Taoism, Buddhism and Christianity have to offer. You can get here via the bus terminal at Wawasan Plaza going north on the Jln Tuaran route (RM3). To get home, just stand outside the temple on the main road and a minibus or regular bus will pick you up. A return taxi should cost around RM20.

Puh Toh Tze Buddhist Temple

Also spelled 'Poh Toh Tse', this temple is 20 minutes north of KK, at Mile (Batu) 5.5. It's quite impressive: a stone staircase-pavilion flanked by 10 Chinese deities leads up to a main temple complex dominated by Kwan Yin, Goddess of Mercy. A Chinese-style reclining Buddha rests inside. You can to enter and wander around. The temple is on a small hill west of the main highway junction north; you can get here by taking the Jln Tuaran bus again or, more easily, hire a taxi; a round-trip shouldn't be more than RM36.

Museum of Islamic Civilisation MUSEUM

(☎538234; admission incl in Sabah Museum ticket; ⏲9am-5pm Sat-Thu; P) This museum consists of six galleries devoted to Muslim culture and history in Malaysia and beyond. The five domes represent the holy Five Pillars of Islam. It's in need of a facelift and an update, but can fill up an hour or two of a boring afternoon.

To get to the museum complex, catch a bus (RM1) along Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman and get off just before the mosque. Be warned: it's a short but steep walk uphill to the museum. Bus 13 also goes right round past the Queen Elizabeth Hospital and stops near Jln Muzium (look for the Sacred Heart Church). Taxi fare will run between RM10 and RM15.

City Mosque MOSQUE

(off Jln Tun Fuad Stephens) Overlooking the South China Sea, this mosque is built in classical style, and is far more attractive than the State Mosque in terms of setting and design. Completed in 2000, it can hold up to 12,000 worshippers. It can be entered by

non-Muslims outside regular prayer times, but dress modestly (long trousers and arms covered is a good rule of thumb, although you may get away with just shoulders covered) and remove your shoes before entering. To get here, take bus 5A from Wawasan Plaza going toward UMS (RM1.50). Just ask the conductor to drop you off outside the City Mosque after the Tanjung Lipat roundabout.

State Mosque MOSQUE
(Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman) Sabah's state mosque is a perfect example of contemporary Malay Muslim architecture: all modernist facade and geometric angles. The building is south of the city centre past the Kampung Air stilt village, not far from the Sabah Museum; you'll see the striped minaret and chevronned dome on your way to or from the airport. Non-Muslim visitors are allowed inside, but dress appropriately.

Tanjung Aru BEACH
This pretty sweep of sand begins around the Shangri-La's Tanjung Aru Resort and stretches south to the airport. Tanjung Aru is a locals' beach, full of picnic spots, swoony-eyed couples and much familial goodwill. Food stalls are plentiful, most closing up a bit after dark, which reminds us: sunsets here are pretty perfect. We would advise against swimming here; the water may look nice, and some locals may tell you it's fine, but others claim it's tainted by run-off from KK and nearby water villages.

Orchid De Villa FARM
(☎380611; www.orchid-de-villa.com.my; Jln Kiansom; ⏲8am-5pm; P) If you're just as crazy about flora as fauna, head to this farm, about 3 km from central KK, along the road to Penampang. The farm specialises in rare Bornean orchids, hybrid orchids, cacti and herbal plants.

Tours

KK has a huge number of tour companies, enough to suit every taste and budget. Head to Wisma Sabah – this office building is full of agents and operators. We have highlighted three companies that specialise in off-the-beaten-track and/or ecotourism activities.

TOP CHOICE GogoSabah SIGHTS
(Map p308; ☎316385, 317385; www.gogosabah.com; Lot G-4, ground fl, Wisma Sabah, Jln Tun Razak) Gogo is a fantastic tour company that does a great job of booking just about anything, anywhere in Sabah. It's especially excellent for motorbike rentals – staff will help map out some of the choicest areas for exploration in Sabah. It also offers car rentals and a serviced apartment, too. It's a good go-to organisation for package tours, but can also help independent travellers out with logistics, itineraries and information.

TOP CHOICE Sticky Rice TOURS
(☎250588; www.stickyricetravel.com) The Sticky Rice guys are extremely helpful, knowledgable about Borneo, and committed to natural immersion, community engagement and independent travel.

TOP CHOICE Adventure Alternative Borneo NATURE
(Map p308; ☎019-802 0549; www.adventurealternativeborneo.com; 97 Jln Gaya) Adventure Alternative specialises in getting Sabah visitors off the beaten/package tour path, and is an excellent resource for independent travellers, especially those who are interested in sustainable and responsible tourism.

Bike Borneo BICYCLE RENTAL
(☎484734; www.bikeborneo.com; City Mall, Jln Lintas, Kota Kinabalu; 1-day tours from RM245) Our favourite means of getting around Sabah on two wheels (with no motor) is mountain biking, and the guys at Fieldskills Adventures, who run Bike Borneo, are the experts on the topic. They run their mountain biking activities largely out of Tuaran; packages include a day ride in the vicinity of town that crosses three (count 'em) swinging bridges and a four-day cycling adventure across the foothills of Mt Kinabalu.

Riverbug/Traverse Tours SIGHTS
(Map p308; ☎260501; www.traversetours.com; Lot 227, Wisma Sabah, Jln Tun Fuad Stephens) An excellent and forward-thinking operator that has a wide variety of tours across Sabah. It makes admirable efforts to engage in sustainable travel practices.

Fieldskills Adventures ADVENTURE TOUR
(☎484734; fieldskills.com.my; City Mall, Jln Lintas) If you're into outdoor activities and adventure, get in touch with these guys. This outfit leads well-regarded cycling, rock climbing, trekking and diving trips across Sabah.

Borneo Adventure ADVENTURE TOUR
(Mapp308; ☎486800; www.borneoadventure.com; Block E-27-3A, Signature Office, KK Times Square)

Award-winning Sarawak-based company with very professional staff, imaginative sightseeing and activity itineraries and a genuine interest in local people and the environment.

Borneo Authentic BOAT TOUR
(☎773066; www.borneo-authentic.com; Lot 3, 1st fl, Putatan Point, Jln JKR) A friendly operation offering a variety of package tours including day-trip cruises on the Sungai Klias.

Equator Adventure Tours CULTURAL TOUR
(☎766351, 013-889 9535; http://equator-adventure.com) Offers plenty of nature and adventure tours, as well as the Hajah Halimah Traditional cooking course (RM135), one of the few cooking courses currently offered in Sabah. Participants check out the local fresh and wet markets and prepare a meal in a Malaysian kitchen with an English-speaking guide. Its head office is in Putatan, 9km east of the city centre.

Borneo Divers DIVING
(Map p308; ☎222226; www.borneodivers.net; 9th fl, Menara Jubili, 53 Jln Gaya) This is the longest-established Borneo dive outfit; it can arrange courses and dives just about anywhere and has its own dive shop. It's possible to get discounted rates as a walk-in.

Downbelow Marine & Wildlife Adventures DIVING
(Map p308; ☎012-866 1935; www.divedownbelow.com; Lot 67 & 68, 5th fl, KK Time Square Block) A well-respected dive outfit with a PADI Centre on Pulau Gaya that can arrange all kinds of travel packages across Borneo.

Borneo Eco Tours SIGHTS
(☎438300; www.borneoecotours.com; Pusat Perindustrian Kolombong Jaya, Mile 5.5 Jln Kolombong) This is a place with a good reputation, arranging tours throughout Malaysian Borneo, including travel to the Kinabatangan area.

Borneo Nature Tours NATURE
(Map p308; ☎267637; www.borneonaturetours.com; Block D, Lot 10, Kompleks Sadong Jaya, Ikan Juara 4) A professional and knowledgeable operation that manages bookings for Danum Valley's Borneo Rainforest Lodge. Its office building is on the corner near a canal.

Scuba Junkie/River Junkie DIVING, RAFTING
(Map p308; ☎255816; www.scuba-junkie.com; ground fl, Lot G7, Wisma Sabah, Jln Haji Saman) Runs diving trips in the Semporna Archipelago and white-water rafting trips in southwest Sabah aimed at the Western backpacker (and flashpacker) crowd.

Sutera Harbour CLIMBING
(Sutera Sanctuary Lodges; Map p308; ☎308914/5; www.suteraharbour.com; ground fl, Lot G15, Wisma Sabah, Jln Haji Saman) Sutera runs a lot of the tourism activities in Sabah, and has a monopoly on accommodation within the Mt Kinabalu ark. Make this your first stop in KK if you're planning to climb Kinabalu and didn't book your bed in advance.

Sleeping

Check out the **Sabah Backpacker Operators Association** (SBA; www.sabahbackpackers.com) which was set up in an effort to help shoestring travellers in the region. Check out its website for discount deals on accommodation and tours. KK's midrange options seem to be sliding towards either end of the budget spectrum. Although backpacker hangouts and top-end treats are in great proliferation, there are still several spots around town suiting those Goldilockses out there.

TOP CHOICE Sarangnova Hotel HOTEL $$
(Map p308; ☎233750; www.sarangnova.com; 98 Jln Gaya; s/d from RM120/170) It's hard not to miss this fascinating hotel; there's a conceptual, woodsy slat fixture attached to the front. The rooms are just as distinctive as the exterior, seeing as they're themed after Borneo's birds. No, no feathers on the walls or anything, but the attractively minimalist decor is offset by gallery-style portraits of local avian life; this includes some picture compositions that are downright Warhol-ian. For being a little different, and still offering superlative service in all the ways that count (helpful staff, central location), we give the Sarangnova two beaks up.

Hotel Eden 54 BOUTIQUE HOTEL $$
(Map p308; ☎266054; www.eden54.com; 54 Jln Gaya; r RM119-179; ❄📶) This smart choice would likely cost five times what it does were it plopped in the West. Fortunately this Eden's contrasting solid dark and light colours, geometric design sensibility and immaculate furniture have turned up in Kota Kinabalu. A fine choice for flashpackers, couples, even families. One warning: the cheapest rooms are windowless and should be avoided.

Rainforest Lodge HOTEL $$
(Map p308; ☎258228; www.rainforestlodgekk.com; Jln Pantai; dm/s/d/ste from RM40/115/135/165;

❄@📶) Located in the swinging centre of the 'Beach Street' complex, the Rainforest is all of a stairward stumble from some of KK's best nightlife. Rooms are refreshingly chic, a nice mix of modern and Sabah-tribal style, and many have cool balconies that look onto the Beach St parade below. Just be warned: it gets loud at night.

Hotel Sixty3 HOTEL $$

(Map p308; ☎212663; www.hotelsixty3.com; Jln Gaya 63; r from RM190; ❄📶) This smart hotel offers business-class standard accommodation, with chilly air-con, flat-screen TVs and big soft beds, all in the heart of KK. The rooms, with their clean white lines and geometric accents, are popular with families and travellers needing a little pampering.

Le Meridien Kota Kinabalu HOTEL $$$

(Map p308; ☎322222; www.starwoodhotels.com; Jln Tun Fuad Stephens; r from RM300; P❄📶🏊) 'If you can't undercut 'em, outclass 'em' seems to be the motto at KK's most central five-star venture, which just reeks of luxury, from the incredible views from the pool deck to the flat-screen TVs and DVD players. The eye-watering prices come down a little in low season, and may even get as low as RM200 if you catch the right discounts.

Klagan Hotel HOTEL $$

(Map p308; ☎488908; www.theklagan.com/; Block D, Warisan Square, Jln Tun Fuad Stephens; r RM180-260; ❄📶) Funky molded recliners and bright yellows and reds in the superior rooms make this midrange option a cut above the competition.

Le Hotel HOTEL $$

(Map p308; ☎319696; www.lehotel.com.my; Block B, 3rd fl, Warisan Sq, Jln Tun Fuad Stephens; r RM120-198; ❄📶) Rooms at the Le are a little smallish, but there's a cool blue colour scheme and midrange amenities, plus nice views of the waterfront at the higher end of the price scale.

Summer Lodge HOSTEL $

(Map p308; ☎244499; www.summerlodge.com.my; Lot 120, Jln Gaya; dm/d RM28/70; ❄📶) Summer Lodge feels like a bed factory, but it's got that social vibe backpackers adore – 'How long have you been travelling? Where did you come from/where are you going? Isn't it funny when foreigners do that thing they do? Fancy a drink?' The answer to the last question is easily solved – the Beach St bar complex is just below.

Jesselton Hotel HOTEL $$$

(Map p308; ☎223333; www.jesseltonhotel.com; 69 Jln Gaya; r/ste from RM180/450; ❄📶) The oldest hotel in KK doesn't need to manufacture character – it fairly drips it, in a dignified if dated way. Mock-colonial wood and marble make you want to don black-tie formal clothes, and the single suite even has its own fishpond. There's also a very good restaurant, coffee shop, business centre and red London cab to shuttle you to the airport.

Kinabalu Daya HOTEL $$

(Map p308; ☎240000; www.kkdayahotel.com; Lot 3-4, Block 9, Jln Pantai; r/ste incl breakfast from RM140/270; ❄📶) Oddly angled hallways and strangely placed lifts give Kinabalu Daya a certain '10-year-old's-Lego-project' vibe. Nevertheless, tons of tourists swear by this midrange stalwart – and justifiably so – it's in the centre of the action, the Best Western branding ensures a certain amount of familiar comfort, and many rooms actually exude a stylish, boutique chic.

Akinabalu Youth Hostel HOSTEL $

(Map p308; ☎272188; www.akinabaluyh.com/; Lot 133, Jln Gaya; dm/r incl breakfast from RM22/60; ❄📶) Friendly staff, fuchsia accent walls and trickling Zen fountains make this a solid option among KK's hostels, particularly if you find a quiet time to take advantage of the gratis internet and DVDs. Accommodation is mostly in basic four-bed rooms, with windows facing an interior hallway.

Lucy's Homestay HOSTEL $

(Backpacker's Lodge; Map p308; ☎261495; lucyhomestay.go-2.net; Lot 25, Lg Dewan, Australia Pl; dm/s/d incl breakfast RM28/45/50; 📶) Lucy's is one of the oldest of the old school hostels in Australia Pl. There's loads of charm, with wooden walls smothered in stickers, business cards and crinkled photographs. It may not suit if you're a party person or want cushy extras, and we get the sense Lucy is a bit more motherly to women than male guests.

Hyatt Regency Kota Kinabalu HOTEL $$$

(Map p308; ☎221234; http://kinabalu.regency.hyatt.com; Jln Datuk Salleh Sulong; r from RM350; P❄📶🏊) Located in the city centre, this branch of the Hyatt chain is all corporate glitz – a good spot to take a businessman for lunch while enjoying impressive views out of a top-storey suite. Rooms are done up in warm earth tones and packed with amenities, including quite possibly the best selection of cable-TV channels in the city.

Shangri-La's Tanjung Aru Resort & Spa
RESORT $$$

(STAR; ☎327888; www.shangri-la.com/kotakinabalu/tanjungaruresort; Tanjung Aru; r from RM550; P❄📶🏊) The Shangri-La is a good choice for those who want to combine the attractions of Kota Kinabalu with the features of a tropical resort. It's a sprawling complex, dotted with swaying palms and metal gongs, located in the Tanjung Aru area about 3km south of the city centre. Dozens of uniformed staff are constantly on hand to respond to your every whim.

Borneo Gaya Lodge
HOSTEL $

(Map p308; ☎242477; www.borneogayalodge.com; 78 Jln Gaya; dm/d from RM25/65; ❄📶) A typical high-volume hostel. Staff are a peach, and will help organise nearly anything, and you're as centrally located in KK as can be.

Myne Hotel
HOTEL $$$

(Map p308; ☎448787; http://hotel.myne.com.my; Lot 21, Warisan Sq; r/ste from RM270/430; ❄📶) It might be located within a mall, but the Myne, with its deep red and gold accents and brass fixtures, feels as gaudy as a chandelier. As high-end spots go, this is an executive-class kind of place, lacking the space of a resort but making up for it with a more central location.

Borneo Backpackers
HOSTEL $

(Map p308; ☎234009; www.borneobackpackers.com; 24 Lg Dewan, Australia Pl; dm/s/d incl breakfast from RM20/40/60; ❄📶) This long-running backpackers is a bit cramped, but it's very popular, especially with younger travellers.

Bunibon
HOSTEL $

(Map p308; ☎210801; www.bunibonlodge.com/; Lot 21, Lorong Dewan; dm/s/d from RM25/50/68; ❄📶) An attractive, friendly hostel with a social vibe and surprisingly nice private doubles.

Kinabalu Backpackers
HOSTEL $

(Map p308; ☎253385; www.kinabalubackpackers.com; Lot 4, Lorong Dewan; dm/s/d from RM25/55/68; ❄📶) A bit bare, but cheap, cheerful and clean. It can organise onward travel and tours.

Eating

KK is one of the few cities in Borneo with an eating scene diverse enough to refresh the noodle-jaded palate. Besides the ubiquitous Chinese *kedai kopi* (coffee shops) and Malay halal restaurants, you'll find plenty of interesting options around the city centre – head to the suburbs if you're looking for some truly unique local fare.

CITY CENTRE

TOP CHOICE Moon Bell
CHINESE $$

(Map p308; ☎019-861 1605; 33 Jln Haji Saman; mains RM15-35; ⏲11am-9pm, closed Mon; ❄) Never had Xinjiang cuisine? This is the food of China's northwest frontier: spicy, rich and meaty, and damned delicious anytime of day. Moon Bell, run by a superlatively friendly Chinese granny, blows us away with spicy eggplant fried in a sweet, caramelized laquer of dark sauce, gamey roast lamb, crispy-skinned duck and hearty clay hotpots. It's best to come here with a big group and eat family-style, just as all the locals do.

TOP CHOICE Alu-Alu Cafe
SEAFOOD $$

(Map p308; Jesselton Point; mains from RM10-30; ⏲10:30am-2:30pm & 6:30am-10pm; ❄) Technically part of the Gayana Eco Resort, Alu-Alu is a delicious restaurant that sources its ingredients from Borneo Eco-Fish, an organisation dedicated to harvesting and distributing seafood from sustainable sources – no shark fin here. Besides having a bit of a moral mission, Alu-Alu is legitimately delicious. It takes the Chinese seafood concept to new levels – lightly breading fish chunks and serving them drowned in a mouth-watering buttermilk sauce, or simmering amid diced chilies. Even the vegetables, simply steamed with a side of pungent garlic, are a main event as opposed to an afterthought.

Ya Kee Bah Kut Teh
CHINESE $

(Map p308; ☎221192; 74 Jln Gaya; mains from RM5; ⏲4pm-11pm) Kosher and halal readers need not apply because this spot is all about the pork. Pork, pork, pork, in herbal soup form (ie *Bah Kut The*). Fatty pork. Pork ribs. Pork belly. Pork with ginger and chillies. Pork offal. With all apologies to *Babe*, we gotta highly recommend this delicious option.

Grazie
ITALIAN $$

(Map p308; ☎019-821 6936; ground fl, Wawasan Plaza; mains from RM17; ⏲noon-3pm Fri-Sun, noon-6pm Mon-Thu; ❄) KK is chock-full of Italian places, but Grazie, run by Italian expat Salvatore Marcello, tops them all handily. Many ingredients are imported (including a fine shot of grappa we finished our meal with); the pizza is thin crust and divine; the pasta and other mains sent from on high. Grazie, *grazie* indeed.

Chili Vanilla
FUSION $$

(Map p308; 35 Jln Haji Sama; mains RM12-20; ⏲10am-10pm, closed Sun; ❄📶) KK is not the first city that springs to mind when we think 'Sure could use some goulash,' but then Chili Vanilla comes along. Run by a Hungarian chef and her local busines partner, this adorable spot dishes out some unexpected delights; besides the goulash there's Moroccan lamb stew, spicy duck tortillas and, just to bring it back to Asia, rich braised oxtail. Wash it all down with the incredible house lime juice, or order off the extensive wine menu.

El Centro
FUSION $

(Map p308; 32 Jln Haji Saman; RM9-16; ⏲5pm-midnight, closed Mon; 📶) El Centro serves up lovely Malaysian dishes, but honestly, we come here when we need a Western food fix (also: good music, nice atmosphere and tasteful decor). The burgers taste like real beef and the pasta dishes are comforting enough to make us long for home.

Borneo 1945 Museum Kopitiam
CAFE $

(Map p308; ☎272945; 24 Jln Dewan, Australia Pl; mains from RM3; ⏲7:30am-midnight; ❄) Odd name for a restaurant-cum-cafe? Yes, because this is a restaurant-cum-cafe-cum-museum, dedicated to the Allied fighting forces in Borneo during WWII. Perhaps the best iced coffee in KK is served here, alongside breakfast favourites like toast and *kaya* (coconut jam), indigenous fare like pandan chicken and rice, and (why not?) reproductions of Anzac biscuits. The on-site mini-museum is worth a visit by itself.

Kohinoor
INDIAN $$$

(Map p308; ☎235160; Lot 4, Waterfront Esplanade; dinner about RM50; ⏲11.30am-2.30pm & 5.30pm-11pm; ❄↗) There are several excellent restaurants along the Waterfront Esplanade, but this Indian place is an easy favourite. Take advantage of its authentic tandoori oven and don't forget to grab a side of pillowy garlic naan.

MAKAN: KOTA KINABALU–STYLE

Kota Kinabalu (KK) may be light on sights, and its urban core isn't a stunner, but the city comes up trumps in the food category. KK's veritable melting pot of cultures has fostered a lively dining scene that differentiates itself from the rest of Malaysia with a host of recipes fusing foreign recipes and local ingredients.

KK's four essential eats:

Sayur Manis – Also known as 'Sabah veggie', this bright-green jungle fern can be found at any Chinese restaurant worth its salt. It's best served fried with garlic, or mixed with fermented shrimp paste. The *sayur manis* plant is a perennial and can grow about 3m high. It is harvested year-round so it tends to be very fresh. Adventurous eaters might want to try other local produce like *tarap,* a fleshy fruit encased in a bristly skin, or *sukun,* a sweet-tasting tuber used to make fritters.

Filipino Barbecue – Located at the north end of the KK Night Market, the Filipino Barbecue Market is the best place in town for grilled seafood at unbeatable prices. Hunker down at one of the crowded tables and point to your prey. Once the waitress has sent your order off to the grill, she'll hand you a cup (for drinking), a basin (to wash your hands) and a small plate to prepare your dipping sauce (mix up the chilli sauce, soy sauce, salt and fresh lime for your own special concoction). No cutlery here! Just dig in with your bare hands and enjoy steaming piles of fresher-than-fresh seafood. Figure around RM15 for a gut-busting meal.

Hinava – Perhaps the most popular indigenous appetiser, colourful *hinava* is raw fish pickled with fresh lime juice, *chilli padi,* sliced shallots and grated ginger. The melange of tangy tastes masks the fishy smell quite well. The best place to try *hinava* is Grace Point, a posh local food court near Tanjung Aru. You'll find it at the 'Local Counter' for around RM2 per plate (the portions are small – the perfect size for a little nibble).

Roti Canai – The ubiquitous *roti canai*, a flaky flat bread fried on a skillet, is served from dawn till dusk at any Indian Muslim *kedai kopi* (coffee shop) around town. Although the dish may appear simple, there's actually a lot of skill that goes into preparing the perfect platter. The cook must carefully and continuously flip the dough (à la pizza chef) to create its signature flakiness. *Roti canai* is almost always served with sauce, usually dhal (lentil curry) or another curry made from either chicken or fish.

DON'T MISS

KOTA KINABALU'S HAWKER CENTRES & FOOD COURTS

As in any Southeast Asian city, the best food in KK is the street food and hawker stalls. If you're worried about sanitation, you really shouldn't be, but assuage your fears by looking for popular stalls, especially those frequented by families.

Night Market (p306) The night market is the best, cheapest and most interesting place in KK for dinner. Vegetarian options available.

Centre Point Basement Food Court (Map p308; Basement fl, Centre Point Shopping Centre, Jln Pasar Baru; mains RM3-10; ⏲11am-10pm) Your ringgit will go a long way at this popular and varied basement food court in the Centre Point Mall. There are Malay, Chinese and Indian options, as well as drink and dessert specialists.

Grace Point (Grace Point; mains RM2-8; ⏲11am-3pm) Take bus 15 out near Tanjung Aru for some local grub at this KK mainstay. The development is actually quite chic compared to the smoke-swathed food courts in the city centre. Go for the Sabahan food stall (located in the far right corner when facing the row of counters) and try *hinava* (raw fish pickled with fresh lime juice, chilli padi, sliced shallots and grated ginger).

Wisma Merdeka Food Court FOOD COURT $
(Map p308; Wisma Merdeka; mains from RM3; ⏲9am-5pm) For cheap, excellent eats, head to the top floor of the Wisma Merdeka mall and get stuck into the local food court. There's a nice diversity of stalls serving mainly Asian street food; the Chinese dumpling stand is delicious and cheap as chips. Note the above hours do not apply to each stall; some close shop earlier in the day and some stick around into the evening, but in general this is a breakfast and lunch food court.

Nagisa JAPANESE $$$
(Map p308; ☎221234; Jln Datuk Salleh Sulong; sushi from RM15; ⏲noon-10pm; ❄🍷) For our money – and you'll spend a bit here – this is the best Japanese in KK. Why? Well, it's the sushi spot of choice for Japanese businessmen on return visits, which oughta tell you something. If they've got roe (caviar) on the menu, get it, and thank us later. Located in the Hyatt Regency.

Kedai Kopi Fatt Kee CHINESE $
(Map p308; 28 Jln Bakau; mains from RM5; ⏲noon-10pm Mon-Sat) The woks are always sizzlin' at this popular Chinese place next to Ang's Hotel. Its *sayur manis* cooked in *belacan* (shrimp paste) is a classic, and the salt-and-pepper prawns are tasty.

TANJUNG ARU

In the early evening, head to Tanjung Aru at the south end of town near the airport for sunset cocktails and light snacks along the ocean. The area has three beaches – First Beach offers up a few restaurants, Second Beach has steamy local stalls, and Third Beach is a great place to bring a picnic as there are no establishments along the sand. A taxi to Tanjung Aru costs RM20, or you can take public transport (RM1.80) – take bus 16, 16A or city bus 2.

Self-Catering

There are a variety of places to stock up on picnic items and hiking snacks, including the centrally located **Milimewa Superstore** (Map p308; Jln Haji Saman) and **Tong Hing Supermarket** (Map p308; Jln Gaya). **7-Eleven** (Map p308; Jln Haji Saman; ⏲24hr) is conveniently open throughout the evening.

Drinking & Entertainment

Get ready for loads of karaoke bars and big, booming nightclubs, clustered around the Waterfront Esplanade, KK Times Square – where the newest hot spots are congregating, and Beach St, in the centre of town, a semipedestrian street cluttered with bars and eateries.

TOP CHOICE **El Centro** BAR
(Map p308; 32 Jln Haji Saman; ⏲5pm-midnight, closed Mon) This fantastic spot, which doubles as a restaurant (p315), was sorely needed in KK. El Centro is the traveller's hangout you've been looking for: cool, Asian-mod decor, soft lighting, good music that isn't the same recycled pop every other Malaysian bar plays, and a general sense of chilled-out-ed-ness that makes it easy to meet other wanderers and form new friendships. Also: the drinks are strong. Stupid strong. And El Centro hosts impromptu quiz nights, costume parties and live music shows.

Bed NIGHTCLUB
(Map p308; ☎251901; Waterfront Esplanade) It's big, it's crowded, it's cheesy – chances are you'll end up in Bed on one of your KK nights out. Yes, get those bed puns ready, as well as your dancing shoes and patience for a *lot* of hip Chinese and locals in outfits that are alternatively slinky/shiny/skimpy. Bands play from 9pm, followed by DJs till closing.

White Room NIGHTCLUB
(Map p308; ☎017-836 7718; KK Times Sq) The hot thing with KK's young folks, the White Room is two levels of sweat, loud music, beautiful bodies and expensive drinks.

Shenanigan's BAR
(Map p308; ☎221234; Hyatt Regency Hotel) Shenanigans is a hot mess, so we kinda love it, even though, honestly, it's just a hot mess. Live bands perform most nights from 9pm and the place is packed on weekends. Prices are horrendous (up to RM30 for a small beer) but get better during happy hour.

Shamrock BAR
(Map p308; ☎249829; 6 Anjung Samudra, Waterfront Esplanade) This bar is as authentically Irish as, well, Borneo, but it is an authentic Irish Bar, Model 1.0: green, Guinness, meat stew, luck o' the lass o' the laddish behaviour. Still a nice place to shoot some stick and watch KK's monied elite get silly.

Hunter's BAR
(Map p308; ☎016-825 7085; Kinabalu Daya Hotel) A favourite for local guides and expats, Hunter's offers up karaoke, sport on the plasma TV and balmy outdoor seating in the heart of the city.

Upperstar BAR
(Map p308; Jln Datuk Saleh Sulong) Opposite the Hilton, this pleasant semi-outdoor bar offers cheap booze and decent pub grub.

Black World KARAOKE
(Map p308; Jln Pantai; ⏲24hrs) We know. This is the only spot that stays open past 2am in central KK. But here's what to expect: cheap beer served in iced buckets, ear-shredding karaoke and dance music, sleazy male clientele, ladies of negotiable affection and bathrooms from the deepest pits of hell.

Suria Sabah CINEMA
(Map p308; Suria Sabah Mall, Jn Haji Saman) The Suria Sabah mall houses a huge multiplex that shows all the Hollywood hits, usually in the original English with subtitles.

Shopping

Like any Malaysian metropolis, KK is all about shopping. Malls seem to pop up every year; at the time of research the big new complex was **Suria Sabah**, which is full of Western retail chains and very few people.

Borneo Trading Post CRAFTS
(Map p308; ☎232655; Lot 16, Waterfront Esplanade, Jln Tun Fuad Stephens) Upmarket tribal art and souvenirs.

Borneo Books BOOKSHOP
(Map p308; ☎538077/241050; www.borneobooks.com; ground fl, Phase 1, Wisma Merdeka; ⏲10am-7pm) A brilliant selection of Borneo-related books, maps and a small used-book section. Plenty of Lonely Planet guides, too.

Information

Free maps of central KK and Sabah are available at almost every hostel or hotel.

Emergency

Ambulance (☎999, 218166)
Fire (☎994)
Police (☎241161, 999; Jln Dewan)

Internet Access

Every sleeping spot we list has some form of internet connection, be it dial-up or wi-fi.
Borneo Net (Jln Haji Saman; per hr RM3; ⏲9am-midnight) Twenty terminals, fast connections and loud headbanger music wafting through the air.
Net Access (Jln Pantai; per hr RM3; ⏲9-2am) Plenty of connections and less noise than other net places in KK. LAN connections are available for using your own laptop.

Immigration Office

Immigration office (☎488700; Kompleks Persekutuan Pentadbiran Kerajaan, Jln UMS; ⏲7am-1pm & 2-5:30pm Mon-Fri) In an office complex near the Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), 9km north of town. Open on weekends, but only for Malaysian passport processing.

Medical Services

Permai Polyclinic (Map p308; ☎232100; 4 Jln Pantai) Excellent private outpatient clinic.
Sabah Medical Centre (☎211333; www.sabamedicalcentre.com/; Lorong Bersatu, off Jalan Damai) Good private hospital care, located about 6km southeast of the city centre.

Money

Central KK is chock-a-block with 24-hour ATMs.
HSBC (Map p308; ☎212622; 56 Jln Gaya; ⏲9am-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 9am-4pm Fri)

Maybank (Map p308; ☎254295; 9 Jln Pantai; ⏲9am-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 9am-4pm Fri) 24hr ATM.

Standard Chartered Bank (Map p308; ☎298111; 20 Jln Haji Saman; ⏲9.15am-3.45pm Mon-Fri)

Post

Main Post Office (☎210855; Jln Tun Razak; ⏲8am-5pm Mon-Fri) Western Union cheques and money orders can be cashed here.

Tourist Information

Sabah Parks (☎523500, 486430; www.sabahparks.org.my; 1st-5th fl, Lot 45 & 46, Block H, Signature Office; ⏲8am-1pm & 2-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 8-11.30am & 2-4.30pm Fri, 8am-12.50pm Sat) Source of information on the state's parks.

Sabah Tourism Board (☎212121; www.sabahtourism.com; 51 Jln Gaya; ⏲8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-4pm Sat, 9am-4pm Sun) Housed in the historic post office building, KK's main tourist office has eager staff and a wide range of brochures. Fair warning, they're going to direct you towards package tours, so don't expect much in the way of independent travel advice.

Tourism Malaysia (☎248698; www.tourism.gov.my; ground fl, Api-Api Centre, Jln Pasar Baru; ⏲8am-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 8am-noon & 1.30-4.30pm Fri) This office is of limited use for travellers, but does offer a few interesting brochures on sights in Peninsular Malaysia.

Getting There & Away

Air

KK is well served by **Malaysia Airlines** (☎1-300 883 000, 088-515555; www.malaysiaairlines.com; MAS; 1st fl, Departure Hall, KKIA; ⏲5.30am-7.30pm) and **AirAsia** (☎03-2171 9333; www.airasia.com; ground fl, Wisma Sabah, Jln Gaya) offer the following international flights to/from KK: Brunei, Shenzhen, Jakarta, Manila, Singapore and Tapei. Within Malaysia, flights go to/from Johor Bahru, Kuala Lumpur and Penang in Peninsular Malaysia, and Kuching, Labuan, Miri, Sandakan, and Tawau in Borneo. **Jetstar** (www.jetstar.com) and **Tiger Airways** (www.tigerairways.com) both offer flights to Singapore.

Boat

All passengers must pay an adult/child RM3.60/1.80 terminal fee for ferries departing from KK. Passenger boats connect KK to Pulau Labuan twice daily at 8am and 1:30pm (adult first/economy class RM36/31, child first/economy class RM23/18), with onward service to Brunei and to Tunku Abdul Rahman National

MAIN DESTINATIONS & FARES FROM KOTA KINABALU

The following bus and minivan transport information was provided to us by the Sabah Tourism Board and should be used as an estimate only: transport times can fluctuate due to weather, prices may change, and the transport authority has been known to alter departure points.

DESTINATION	DURATION (HR)	PRICE (RM)	TERMINAL	DEPARTURES
Beaufort	2	12	Padang Merdeka	7am-5pm (frequent)
Keningau	2½	17	Padang Merdeka	7am-5pm (8 daily)
Kota Belud	1	10	Padang Merdeka	7am-5pm (frequent)
Kuala Penyu	2	20	Segama Bridge	8-11am (hourly)
Kudat	3	22	Padang Merdeka	7am-4pm (frequent)
Lahad Datu	8	40	Inanam	7am, 8.30am, 9am, 8pm
Lawas (Sarawak)	4	25	Padang Merdeka	8.30am & 1.30pm
Mt Kinabalu NP	2	15-20	Inanam & Padang Merdeka	7am-8pm (very frequent)
Ranau	2	15	Padang Merdeka	7am-5pm
Sandakan	6	35-40	Inanam	7.30am-2pm (frequent) & 8pm
Semporna	9	50	Inanam	7am, 8.30am, 9am, 8pm
Tawau	9	55	Inanam	7.30am, 2pm, 8pm
Tenom	3½	25	Padang Merdeka	8am, noon, 4pm

DON'T MISS

RIDING THE BORNEO RAILS

Back in the late 19th-century, colonials used to swan around the western Sabah coast on the **North Borneo Railway**, which eventually fell into disuse and disrepair. Recently, the old rail line has been revived, not as a viable means of train travel but as a nostalgic attraction in its own right. The old iron horse has been restored, with natural wood interiors and the original exterior colour scheme of green and cream, set off with the railway's old brass emblem of a crown surmounting a tiger holding a rail wheel.

The train leaves KK at 9:30am and arrives in Papar at 11:45am, taking in mountains and rice paddies, with stops for a look at a Chinese temple and the Papar wet market. On the trip back to KK (12.20–1.40pm) a smashing colonially inspired tiffin lunch of cucumber sandwiches and satay (plus some other goodies) is served.

The railway is operated by Sutera Harbour (p312); adult/child tickets cost RM270/170. The train leaves the station in Tanjung Aru twice a week, on Wednesday and Saturday. For more information or to book tickets, contact Sutera Harbour at 308500 or nbrinfo@suteraharbour.com.my.

Park. Ferries depart from Jesselton Point, located a little way north of the **Suria Sabah shopping mall** (Map p308).

Bus & Minivan

Several different stations around KK serve a variety of out-of-town destinations. There is a bus to Brunei.

In general, land transport heading east departs from Inanam (Utara Terminal; 9km north of the city) while those heading north and south on the west coast leave from Padang Merdeka (Merdeka Field) Bus Station (also called Wawasan or 'old bus station'; at the south end of town). Local buses (RM1.80) from Wawasan can take tourists to Inanam if you don't want to splurge on the RM20 taxi. Have your hotel call ahead to the bus station to book your seat in advance. Same-day bookings are usually fine, although weekends are busier than weekdays. It's always good to ring ahead because sometimes transport will be halted due to flooding caused by heavy rains.

Taxi

Share taxis operate from the Padang Merdeka Bus Station. Several share taxis do a daily run between KK and Ranau, passing the entrance road to the Kinabalu National Park office. The fare to Ranau or Kinabalu National Park is RM25, or you can charter a taxi for RM100 per car (note that a normal city taxi will charge around RM200 for a charter).

Getting Around

To/From the Airport

The international airport is in Tanjung Aru, 7km south of central KK. Please note that the two terminals of Kota Kinabalu International Airport (KKIA) are not connected – they feel like two different airports. Most airlines operate out of Terminal 1, but an increasing amount of carriers, including AirAsia, depart from Terminal 2. City bus 2 and bus 16A (RM1.50) service Terminal 2 and can be boarded at City Park station downtown. Minibuses (RM3) leave from City Park station for Terminal 1 (look for city bus 1 to access this terminal in the future). Public transport runs from 6am to 7pm daily. Taxis heading from terminals into town operate on a voucher system (RM38) sold at a taxi desk on the terminal's ground floor. Taxis heading to the airport should not charge over RM40 if you catch one in the city centre.

Car

Major car-rental agencies have counters on the first floor at KKIA and branch offices elsewhere in town. Manual cars start at around RM120 to RM140 per day and most agencies can arrange chauffeured vehicles as well.

Borneo Express (☎016-886 0793, In Sandakan 016-886 0789; http://borneocar.com/; Lot 1-L01 C4, Kota Kinabalu Airport)

Kinabalu Heritage Tours & Car Rental (☎318311; www.travelborneotours.com; Block F, Tanjung Aru Plaza)

Extra Rent A Car (☎251529, 218160; www.e-erac-online.com; 2nd fl, Beverly Hotel, Jln Kemajuan)

Minivans

Minivans operate from several stops, including Padang Merdeka Bus Station and the car park outside Milimewa Superstore. They circulate the town looking for passengers. Since most destinations in the city are within walking distance, it's unlikely that you'll need to catch a minivan, although they're handy for getting to the airport or to KK Times Square. Most destinations within the city cost RM1 to RM2.

Taxi

Expect to pay roughly between RM7 to RM10 for a ride in the city centre. Taxis can be found throughout the city and at all bus stations and shopping centres. There's a stand by Milimewa Supermarket (near the intersection of Jln Haji Saman and Beach St) and another 200m southwest of City Park.

AROUND KOTA KINABALU

Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park

Whenever one enjoys a sunset off KK, the view tends to be improved by the five jungly humps of Manukan, Gaya, Sapi, Mamutik and Sulug islands. These swaths of sand, plus the reefs and cerulean waters in between them, make up **Tunku Abdul Rahman National Park** (adult/child RM10/6), covering a total area of just over 49 sq km (two-thirds of which is water). Only a short boat ride from KK, the islands are individually quite pretty, but in an effort to accommodate the ever-increasing tourist flow (especially large numbers of Chinese), barbecue stalls and restaurants now crowd the beaches. On weekends the islands can get *very* crowded, but on weekdays you can find some serenity. Accommodation tends to be expensive, but most travellers come here for day trips anyway, and there are camping options.

Although it's no Sipadan, diving in the park is a popular activity, and the area is considered a good spot for getting open water certified. **Borneo Dream** (☎088-244064; www.borneodream.com; F-G-1 Plaza Tanjung Arum, Jalan Mat Salleh, Kota Kinabalu) and Downbelow (p312) both run diving programs on Pulau Gaya.

PULAU MANUKAN

Manukan is the most popular destination for KK residents and has plenty of facilities. It is the second-largest island in the group, its 20 hectares largely covered in dense vegetation. There's a good beach with coral reefs off the southern and eastern shores, a walking trail around the perimeter and a network of nature trails – if you want to thoroughly explore all of the above it shouldn't take more than two hours, and you don't need to be particularly fit. There's little clouds of tropical fish swimming around, many of which can be seen simply by looking down from the jetty. When you depart the boat you'll likely be pointed towards a kiosk that hires equipment masks and snorkels (RM15), beach mats (RM5) and body boards (RM10).

Manukan Island Resort (☎017-833 5022; www.suterasanctuarylodges.com; villa from RM1120; ❄📶), managed by Sutera Sanctuary Lodges, has the only accommodation on the island. It comprises a restaurant, swimming pool and tennis courts, as well as 20 dark-wood villas, all overlooking the South China Sea and decked out in tasteful Bali-chic style; the cool stone showers hemmed in by flowering plants are a nice touch.

PULAU MANUKAN

Mamutik is the smallest island out here, a mere 300m from end to end. A nice beach runs up and down the east coast of the island, although it can get pretty kelp-y after bad weather. Snorkelling here is pretty good, but you may want to avoid the shallow area; the coral here will do a number on your bare feet. There's no resort, but camping (RM5 per person, pay on arrival) is possible. There's a small store-restaurant-snorkel-rental place, but it's a good idea to bring supplies.

PULAU SAPI

They should really rename Pulau Sapi (Cow Island) to Pulau Biawak (Monitor Lizard Island). This little speck also offers snorkelling and attractive beaches, but Sapi can also get very cramped with day-tripping families. The island is separated from Gaya by a very shallow 200m channel that you can swim across if you feel up to it, but be careful; there are definitely no life guards on duty. Otherwise, the main activities include wading, relaxing on the beach around the jetty or exploring the trails through the forest; it takes about 45 minutes to walk around the island. There are changing rooms, toilets, barbecue pits, and a small snack kiosk, plus an outfitted campsite (RM5 per person), but you'll need to bring most supplies from the mainland.

PULAU GAYA

With an area of about 15 sq km, Pulau Gaya is the Goliath of KK's offshore islands, rising to an elevation of 300m. It's also the closest to KK and covered in virtually undisturbed tropical forest. The bays on the east end are filled with bustling water villages, inhabited by Filipino immigrants (legal and otherwise)

who live in cramped houses built on stilts in the shallow water, with mosques, schools and simple shops, also built on stilts. Residents of KK warn against exploring these water villages, saying that incidences of theft and other crimes have occurred. Three high-end resorts make up the accommodation options on Pulau Gaya.

Bunga Raya Island Resort RESORT **$$$**
(☎380390; http://bungarayaresort.com; villas from RM1715; ❄📶🏊) Six stunning villas occupy a fertile patch of beachfront. The Plunge Pool has just that – its own deep body of water that looks over the beach and ocean – while the incredibly romantic Treehouse perches over a jacuzzi, lounge and its own private swimming hole. Operated by the owners of Gayana Eco Resort.

Gaya Island Resort RESORT **$$$**
(☎KL number 3 2783 1000; www.gayaislandresort.com; villas from RM1100; ❄📶🏊) Six immaculate villas that blend modernity with open air accents, earth tones with cool whites, and a subtle integration of the ocean with green jungle perch over a half-moon bay. Attentive service makes for a property that drips with refined indugence.

Gayana Eco Resort RESORT **$$$**
(☎380390; www.gayana-eco-resort.com; villas from RM1200; ❄📶🏊) Five stunning villas stuffed with modern amenities and island chic touches make up posh Gayana. The Bakau (mangrove) Villa overlooks a series of tangled flooded forest, while the Palm Villa's deceptive simplicity masks steps that lead into the warm heart of Tunku Rahman's protected waters.

PULAU SULUG

Shaped like a cartoon speech bubble, Sulug has an area of 8.1 hectares and is the least visited of the group, probably because it's the furthest away from KK. It only has one beach, on a spit of land extending from its eastern shore. Unfortunately, the snorkelling is pretty poor. If you want a quiet getaway, Sulug is a decent choice, but you'll have to charter a boat to get here; the normal ferries don't stop here. If you want a secluded beach and don't want to lay out for a charter (at least RM240), you'll do better by heading to Manukan and walking down the beach to escape the crowds.

Getting There & Away

Boat

Boats to the park leave from 8.30am to 4.15pm when full from KK's Jesselton Point Ferry Terminal (commonly known as 'The Jetty' by locals and taxi drivers); the last boats leave the islands for KK around 5pm. Service is every 30 minutes, but on slower days this can be every hour. Inquire at the counter for the next available boat, sign up for your chosen destination and take a seat until there are enough passengers to depart. Catch a boat in the morning, as it's much harder to make up boat numbers in the afternoon. Boats also run from Sutera Harbour – more convenient for those staying near Tanjung Aru (or for those wanting to reach Pulau Gaya). Return fares to Mamutik, Manukan and Sapi hover around RM30. You can also buy two-/three-island passes for RM40/48.

WATER MONITORING

If you look around the edge of the barbecue pits on Sapi, you may spot a fence cordoning off some of the jungle, and at said fence you'll usually find a hissing band of great, grey-green dragons: water monitor lizards, known locally as *biawak*. They're some of the largest reptiles in the world, with males averaging a length of 1.5m to 2m, sometimes growing as large as 3m, weighing anywhere from 19kg to 50kg. Within the lizard family they are only outstripped by Komodo Dragons.

These mini-Godzillas are found all over Malaysia, but on Pulau Sapi they are the king of the jungle – and the waves. It's amazing watching these lumbering beasts take to the water, where they instantly transform into graceful sea monsters reminiscent of aquatic dinosaurs (which, indeed, are believed to be the ancestors of monitor lizards). Despite their size, water monitors aren't apex predators in the vein of crocodiles or their Komodo Dragon cousins. Instead, they serve the purpose of coyotes in North America, or jackals in Africa: adaptable, clever scavengers that seem to thrive, rather than suffer, when humans are near, making use of our refuse dumps as their larders.

Water monitors are awesome creatures, but don't be an idiot like some tourists and try to pose next to them or hand feed them. Their mouths are filled with deadly bacteria and their claws can rip a gash in your flesh you won't soon forget.

The set fee for charter to one island is RM250, but this can be negotiated. Try to deal directly with a boatperson if you do this – don't talk to the touts who prowl the area. And don't consider paying until you return to the dock.

A RM3 terminal fee is added to all boat journeys, and a RM10 entrance fee to the marine park, paid when you purchase your ticket (if you are chartering a boat this should be included).

NORTHWESTERN SABAH

The northern edge of Sabah manages to compact, into a relatively small space, much of the geographic and cultural minutiae that makes Borneo so special. The ocean? Lapping at miles of sandy beach, sky blue to stormy grey, and concealing superlative dive sites. The people? Kadazan–Dusun, Rungus, rice farmers, mountain hunters, ship builders and deep-sea fishermen. And then, of course, 'the' mountain: Gunung Kinabalu, or Mt Kinabalu, the focal point of the island's altitude, trekkers, folklore and spiritual energy. For generations, the people of Sabah have been drawn to the mountain; don't be surprised when you fall under its spell too.

Mt Kinabalu & Kinabalu National Park

Gunung Kinabalu, as it is known in Malay, is more than the highest thing on the world's third largest island. And it is more than scenery. Mt Kinabalu is ubiquitous in Sabah to the point of being inextricable. It graces the state's flag and is a constant presence at the edge of your eyes, catching the clouds and shading the valleys. It is only when you give the mountain your full attention that you realise how special this peak, the region's biggest tourist attraction, truly is.

The 4095m peak of Mt Kinabalu may not be a Himalayan sky-poker, but Malaysia's first Unesco World Heritage Site is by no means an easy jaunt. The main trail up is essentially a very long walk up a very steep hill, past alpine jungle and sunlit moonscapes, with a little scrabbling thrown in for good measure. If you don't feel up to reaching the mountain top, its base has some worthy attractions, including a large network of nature trails.

That said, the main detriment to climbing is not the physical challenge, but the cost. Things are expensive within Mt Kinabalu National Park. Bottled water costs four or five times what it goes for in KK and Sutera Sanctuary Lodges has a monopoly on accomodation. You'll have to decide if you want to accept these fees because they are basically the cost of climbing the mountain.

Amazingly, the mountain is still growing: researchers have found it increases in height by about 5mm a year. On a clear day you can see the Philippines from the summit; usually, though, the mountain is thoroughly wreathed in fog by midmorning.

History

Although it is commonly believed that local tribesmen climbed Kinabalu many years earlier, it was Sir Hugh Low, the British colonial secretary on Pulau Labuan, who recorded the first official ascent of Mt Kinabalu in 1851. Today Kinabalu's tallest peak is named after him, thus Borneo's highest point is ironically known as Low's Peak.

In those days the difficulty of climbing Mt Kinabalu lay not in the ascent, but in getting through the jungle to the mountain's base. Finding willing local porters was another tricky matter – the tribesmen who accompanied Low believed the spirits of the dead inhabited the mountain. Low was therefore obliged to protect the party by supplying a large basket of quartz crystals and teeth, as was the custom back then. During the subsequent years, the spirit-appeasement ceremonies became more and more elaborate, so that by the 1920s they had come to include loud prayers, gunshots, and the sacrifice of seven eggs and seven white chickens. You have to wonder at what point explorers started thinking the locals might be taking the mickey…

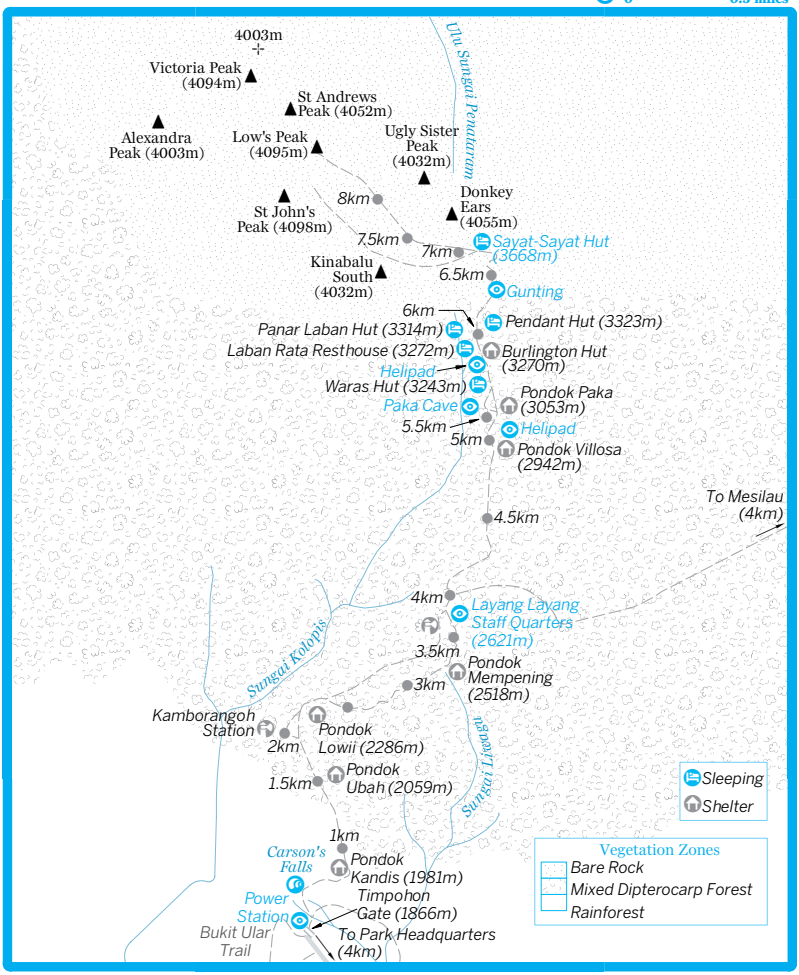
These days, the elaborate chicken dances are no more, although climbing the mountain can still feel like a rite of passage.

Check out Mountain Torq's website (www.mountaintorq.com) for more fun facts about Kinabalu's history.

Geology

Many visitors to Borneo assume Mt Kinabalu is a volcano, but the mountain is actually a huge granite dome that rose from the depths below some nine million years ago. In geological terms, Mt Kinabalu is still young. Little erosion has occurred on the exposed granite rock faces around the summit, though the effects of glaciers that used to cover much of the mountain can be detected by striations on the rock. There's no longer a

Mt Kinabalu Summit Trail



snowline and the glaciers have disappeared, but at times ice forms in the rock pools near the summit.

Orientation & Information

Kinabalu National Park HQ is 88km by road northeast of KK and set in gardens with a magnificent view of the mountain. At 1588m the climate is refreshingly cool compared to the coast; the average temperatures are 20°C in the day and 13°C at night. The hike to the summit is difficult.

On the morning of your arrival, pay your park entry fee, present your lodging reservation slip to the Sutera Sanctuary Lodges office to receive your official room assignment, and check in with the Sabah Parks office to pay your registration and guide fees. Advance accommodation bookings are *essential* if you plan on climbing the mountain.

PERMITS, FEES & GUIDES

A park fee, climbing permit, insurance and a guide fee are *mandatory* if you intend to climb Mt Kinabalu. All permits and guides must be arranged at the **Sabah Parks office** (⏲7am-7pm), which is directly next door to the Sutera Sanctuary Lodges

office, immediately on your right after you pass through the main gate of the park. Pay all fees at park HQ before you climb and don't ponder an 'unofficial' climb as permits (laminated cards worn on a string necklace) are scrupulously checked at two points you cannot avoid passing on the way up the mountain.

Virtually every tour operator in KK can hook you up with a trip to the mountain; solo travellers are often charged around RM1400. It's possible, and a little cheaper, to do it on your own – but plan ahead. Packages are obviously easier if pricey, so if you find one that sounds enticing, go for it.

All visitors entering the park are required to pay a park entrance fee: RM15 for adults and RM10 for children under 18 (Malaysians pay RM3 and RM1, respectively). A climbing permit costs RM100/RM40 for adults/children, while Malaysian nationals pay RM30/RM12. Climbing insurance costs a flat rate of RM7 per person. Guide fees for the summit trek cost RM100. Climbers ascending Kinabalu along the Mesilau Trail will pay an extra RM10 (small group) or RM20 (large group) for their guide. Your guide will be assigned to you on the morning you begin your hike. If you ask, the park staff will try to attach individual travellers to a group so that guide fees can be shared. Couples can expect to be given their own guide. Guides are mostly Kadazan from a village nearby and many of them have travelled to the summit several hundred times. Try to ask for a guide who speaks English – he or she (usually he) might point out a few interesting specimens of plant life. The path up the mountain is pretty straightforward, and the guides walk behind the slowest member of the group, so think of them as safety supervisors rather than trailblazers.

All this does not include at least RM415 for room-and-board on the mountain at Laban Rata. With said lodging, plus buses or taxis to the park, you're looking at spending over RM800 for the common two-day, one-night trip to the mountain. That said, you *can* do a one-day hike if you show up at the park entrance when it opens (7am) and are judged physically fit by a ranger. This allows you to cut the cost of lodging, but there are two catches. First, when we say you need to be fit, we mean *fit*. A friend – one of those annoyingly healthy mountaineers who probably sleepwalks up the Alps – couldn't walk upstairs for two days after managing the one-day hike. Second, and more worryingly, there are rumours the park will discontinue allowing one-day hikes in the future.

Optional extra fees include a taxi ride from the park office to the Timpohon Gate (RM16.50 per vehicle, one-way, four-person maximum), a climbing certificate (RM10) and a porter (RM102 per trip to the summit or RM84 to Laban Rata) who can be hired to carry a maximum load of 10kg.

If you need a helicopter lift off the mountain for emergency reasons, the going rate is RM2500.

EQUIPMENT & CLOTHING

No special equipment is required to successfully summit the mountain, however a headlamp is strongly advised for the predawn jaunt to the top – you'll need your hands free to climb the ropes on the summit massif. Expect freezing temperatures near the summit, not to mention strong winds and

CAN I AVOID PLAYING MONOPOLY?

One of the most common questions travellers in Sabah ask is: is there any way to go up Mt Kinabalu that is less expensive? The best way to do so is the one-day climb, but that prospect is tough unless you're fit, and even then it is discouraged by park officials, and may be discontinued in the future.

Many travellers hate that Sutera has a monopoly on accomodation, or that they are encouraged to book their climb months in advance, which discourages just showing up and walking. If you feel this way, it may be best to walk the trails at the base of Mt Kinabalu or attempt the Mesilau Trail up to the first park checkpoint, which offers much of the full climb's scenery.

Sabah Parks won't allow a night climb, and permits are carefully checked at several points on the mountain. We did meet hikers who wanted to try the above, but this would involve a lot of sneaking around and tempting fate, be it a trekking accident or arrest, and we don't recommend this. If you're set against giving Sabah Parks or Sutera your money, trust us, there are plenty of other things to see and do here.

KINABALU PACKING LIST

- Headlamp (with spare batteries)
- Comfortable running shoes
- Wool socks and athletic socks
- Hiking shorts or breathable pants
- Three T-shirts (one made of lightweight synthetic material)
- Fleece jacket
- Lightweight shell jacket or rain jacket
- Fleece or wool hat
- Fleece gloves
- Long johns
- Hand towel
- Water bottle
- Sunscreen
- Insect repellent
- Light, high-energy snacks
- Camera
- Money
- Earplugs for dorms

The above items should easily fit into a small waterproof backpack. Apply a dab of sunscreen and insect repellent before you depart.

the occasional rainstorm. Don't forget a water bottle, which can be refilled at unfiltered (but potable) tanks en route.

THE CLIMB TO THE SUMMIT

This schedule assumes you're doing a two-day/one-night ascent of the mountain. You'll want to check in at park headquarters at around 9am (8.45am at the latest for *via ferrata* participants) to pay your park fees, grab your guide and start the ascent (four to six hours) to Laban Rata (3272m) where you'll spend the night before finishing the climb. On the following day you'll finish scrambling to the top at about 2.30am in order to reach the summit for a breathtaking sunrise over Borneo.

A climb up Kinabalu is only advised for those in adequate physical condition. The trek is tough, and *every step you take* will be uphill. You will negotiate several obstacles along the way, including slippery stones, blinding humidity, frigid winds and slow-paced trekkers. Mountain Torq compares the experience to squeezing five days of hiking into a 38-hour (or less, if you do the one-day climb) trek.

There are two trail options leading up the mountain – the Timpohon Trail and the Mesilau Trail. If this is your first time climbing Kinabalu, we advise taking the Timpohon Trail – it's shorter, easier (but by no means easy!) and more convenient from the park headquarters (an hour's walk or short park shuttle ride; RM16.50 one-way per vehicle, four-person maximum). If you are participating in Mountain Torq's *via ferrata,* you are required to take the Timpohon Trail in order to reach Laban Rata in time for your safety briefing at 4pm. The Mesilau Trail offers second-time climbers (or fit hikers) the opportunity to really enjoy some of the park's natural wonders. This trail is less trodden so the chances of seeing unique flora and fauna are higher.

As you journey up to the summit, you'll happen upon signboards showing your progress – there's a marker every 500m. There are also rest shelters *(pondok)* at regular intervals, with basic toilets and tanks of unfiltered (but potable) drinking water. The walking times that follow are conservative estimates – don't be surprised if you move at a slightly speedier pace, and certainly don't be discouraged if you take longer – everyone's quest for the summit is different.

ADDING INSULT TO INJURY

As your two-day Kinabalu adventure comes to an end and you limp across the Timpohon Gate a shrivelled bundle of aching muscles and bones, don't forget to glance at the climbing records chart. Every year the **Kinabalu International Climbathon** (http://climbathon.sabahtourism.com) attracts the fittest athletes from around the world for a competitive climb-off as dozens of hikers zoom up the mountain a la the Road Runner. The oldest person to reach the summit was a Japanese lady who battled her way to the top at the grand old age of 90. So just remember, when you're smugly slinking by slower hikers, there are pensioners out there who would leave you for dead…

TIMPOHON GATE TO LAYANG LAYANG

'Why am I sweating this much *already?*'

The trip to the summit officially starts at the Timpohon Gate (1866m) and from there it's an 8.72km march to the summit. There is a small bathroom outhouse located 700m before the Timpohon Gate, and a convenience shop at the gate itself for impulse snack and beverage purchases.

After a short, deceptive descent, the trail leads up steep stairs through the dense forest and continues winding up and up for the rest of the trip. There's a charming waterfall, **Carson's Falls**, beside the track shortly after the start, and the forest can be alive with birds and squirrels in the morning. Five *pondok* (shelters) are spaced at intervals of 15 to 35 minutes between Timpohon Gate and Layang Layang and it's about three hours to the Layang Layang (2621m) rest stop. Near **Pondok Lowii** (2286m) the trail follows an open ridge giving great views over the valleys and up to the peaks.

LAYANG LAYANG TO PONDOK PAKA

'Why did I put all that extra crap in my rucksack?'

This part of the climb can be the most difficult for some – especially around the 4.5km marker. You've definitely made some headway but there's still a long trek to go – no light at the end of the jungly tunnel quite yet. It takes about 1¾ hours to reach **Pondok Paka** (3053m), the seventh shelter on the trail, 5.5km from the start.

PONDOK PAKA TO LABAN RATA

'Why did I pay all that money just to climb a freakin' mountain?!'

Also known as the 'can't I pay someone to finish this for me?' phase, this part of the climb is where beleaguered hikers get a second wind as the treeline ends and the summit starts to feel closer. At the end of this leg you'll reach **Laban Rata** (3272m), your 'home sweet home' on the mountain. Take a good look at the slender signpost announcing your arrival – it's the propeller of the helicopter once used to hoist the construction materials to build the elaborate rest station. This leg takes around 45 minutes.

LABAN RATA TO SAYAT-SAYAT HUT

'Why am I waking up at the time I usually go to bed back home?'

It's 2am and your alarm just went off. Is this a dream? Nope. You're about to climb the last part of the mountain in order to reach the summit before sunrise.

Most people set off at around 2.45am, and it's worth heading out at this time even if you're in great shape (don't forget your torch). The one-hour climb to **Sayat-Sayat** hut (3668m) involves a lot of hiker traffic and the crossing of the sheer Panar Laban rock face. There is little vegetation, except where overhangs provide some respite from the wind. It is one of the toughest parts of the climb, especially in the cold and dark of the predawn hours.

SAYAT-SAYAT HUT TO SUMMIT

'Why is it so darn cold out?! I'm standing near the equator!'

After checking in at Sayat-Sayat, the crowd of hikers begins to thin as stronger walkers forge ahead and slower adventurers pause for sips from their water bottle. Despite the stunning surroundings, the last stretch of the summit ascent is, of course, the steepest and hardest part of the climb.

From just beyond Sayat-Sayat, the summit looks deceptively close and, though it's just over 1km, the last burst will take between one to three hours depending on your stamina. You might even see shattered climbers crawling on hands and knees as they reach out for the top of Borneo.

THE SUMMIT

[Speechless…]

This is it – the million-dollar moment (or the RM800+ moment for those who are keeping score…). Don't forget the sunrise can be glimpsed from anywhere on the mountain. The summit warms up quickly as the sun starts its own ascent between 5.45am and 6.20am, and the weary suddenly smile; the climb up a distant memory, the trek down an afterthought.

Consider signing up with Mountain Torq to climb back to Laban Rata along the world's highest *via ferrata*.

THE JOURNEY BACK TO THE BOTTOM

'Why didn't I believe anyone when they said that going down was just as hard as going up?!'

You'll probably leave the summit at around 7.30am and you should aim to leave Laban Rata no later than 12.30pm. The gruelling descent back down to Timpohon Gate from Laban Rata takes between three and four hours (if you're returning to the bottom along the Mesilau Trail it will take more time than descending to the Timpohon Gate). The weather can close in very quickly and the granite is slippery even when dry. During rainstorms the downward trek feels like walking through a river. Slower walkers often find that their legs hurt more the day after – quicker paces lighten the constant pounding as legs negotiate each descending step. If you participated in the *via ferrata* you will be absolutely knackered during your descent and will stumble into Timpohon Gate just before sunset (around 6pm to 6.30pm).

A 1st-class certificate can be purchased for RM10 by those who complete the climb; 2nd-class certificates are issued for making it to Laban Rata. These can be collected at the park office.

WALKS AROUND THE BASE

It's well worth spending a day exploring the marked trails around park headquarters; if you have time, it may be better to do it before you climb the mountain, as chances are you won't really feel like it afterwards. There are various trails and lookouts.

The base trails interconnect with one another like a tied shoelace, so you can spend the day, or indeed days, walking at a leisurely pace through the beautiful forest. Some interesting plants, plenty of birds and, if you're lucky, the occasional mammal can be seen along the **Liwagu Trail** (6km), which follows the river of the same name. When it rains, watch out for slippery paths and legions of leeches.

At 11am each day a **guided walk** (per person RM3) starts from the Sabah Parks office and lasts for one to two hours. The knowledgeable guide points out flowers, plants, birds and insects along the way. If you set

VIA FERRATA

Mountain Torq has dramatically changed the Kinabalu climbing experience by creating an intricate system of rungs and rails crowning the mountain's summit. Known as *via ferrata* (literally 'iron road' in Italian), this alternative style of mountaineering has been a big hit in Europe for the last century and is just starting to take Asia by storm. In fact, Mountain Torq is Asia's first *via ferrata* system, and, according to the Guinness Book of World Records, it's the highest 'iron road' in the world.

After ascending Kinabalu in the traditional fashion, participants use the network of levers to return to the Laban Rata rest camp along the mountain's dramatic granite walls. Mountain Torq's star attraction, the **Low's Peak Circuit** (RM550; minimum age 17), is a four-to-five-hour scramble down metres upon metres of sheer rock face. This route starts at 3800m, passing a variety of obstacles before linking up to the Walk the Torq path for the last part of the journey. The route's threadlike tightrope walks and swinging planks will have you convinced that the course designers are sadistic, but that's what makes it so darn fun – testing your limits without putting your safety in jeopardy. Those who don't want to see their heart leaping out of their chest should try the **Walk the Torq** (RM400; minimum age 10) route. This two-to-three-hour escapade is an exciting initiation into the world of *via ferrata*, offering dramatic mountain vistas with a few less knee-shaking moments. No matter which course you tackle, you'll undoubtedly think that the dramatic vertical drops are nothing short of exhilarating.

Via ferrata may be an Italian import, but Mountain Torq is pure Bornean fun. For more information about Mountain Torq, check out www.mountaintorq.com.

FLORA & FAUNA OF MT KINABALU

Mt Kinabalu is a botanical paradise, designated a Centre of Plant Diversity as well as a Unesco-listed World Heritage Site. The wide range of habitats supports an even wider range of natural history, and over half the species growing above 900m are unique to the area.

Among the more spectacular flowers are orchids, rhododendrons and the *Insectivorous nepenthes* (pitcher plant). Around park HQ, there's dipterocarp forest (rainforest); creepers, ferns and orchids festoon the canopy, while fungi grow on the forest floor. Between 900m and 1800m, there are oaks, laurels and chestnuts, while higher up there's dense rhododendron forest. On the windswept slopes above Laban Rata vegetation is stunted, with *sayat-sayat* a common shrub. The mountain's uppermost slopes are bare of plant life.

Deer and monkeys are no longer common around park HQ, but you can see squirrels, including the handsome Prevost's squirrel and the mountain ground squirrel. Tree shrews can sometimes be seen raiding rubbish bins. Common birds are Bornean treepies, fantails, bulbuls, sunbirds and laughing-thrushes, while birds seen only at higher altitudes are the Kinabalu friendly warbler, the mountain blackeye and the mountain blackbird. Other wildlife includes colourful butterflies and the huge green moon moth.

out from KK early enough, it's possible to arrive at the park in time for the guided walk.

Many of the plants found on the mountain are cultivated in the **Mountain Garden** (Map p329; admission RM5; ⏲9am-1pm, 2:30am-4pm) behind the visitors centre. Guided tours of the garden depart at 9am, noon and 3pm and cost RM5.

Sleeping

Laban Rata (On The Mountain)

Camping is not allowed on the mountain, and thus access to the summit is limited by access to the huts on the mountain at Laban Rata (3272m). This *must* be booked in advance, the earlier the better. In order to have any hope of clear weather when you reach the summit, you must arrive around dawn, and the only way to do this is by spending a night at Laban Rata. If you attempt a one-day ascent starting around 7am, by the time you get to the summit it will almost certainly be clouded over or raining.

Sutera Sanctuary Lodges (☎088-308470, 088-318888, info 243 629; suterasanctuarylodges.com.my; Jln Haji Saman, Lot G15, ground fl, Wisma Sabah; ⏲8:30am-4:30pm Mon-Sat, 8:30am-12:30pm Sun) in Kota Kinabalu operates almost all of the accommodation here, but space is limited. Be mindful that travellers often report frustration with booking huts on the mountain – claiming the booking system is disorganised and inefficient, the huts are often full, or aren't full when they're told they are. Bookings can be made online (but only if you book at least two nights), in person or over the phone – our experience was that it was best to book at Sutera's offices in KK if you haven't done so in advance.

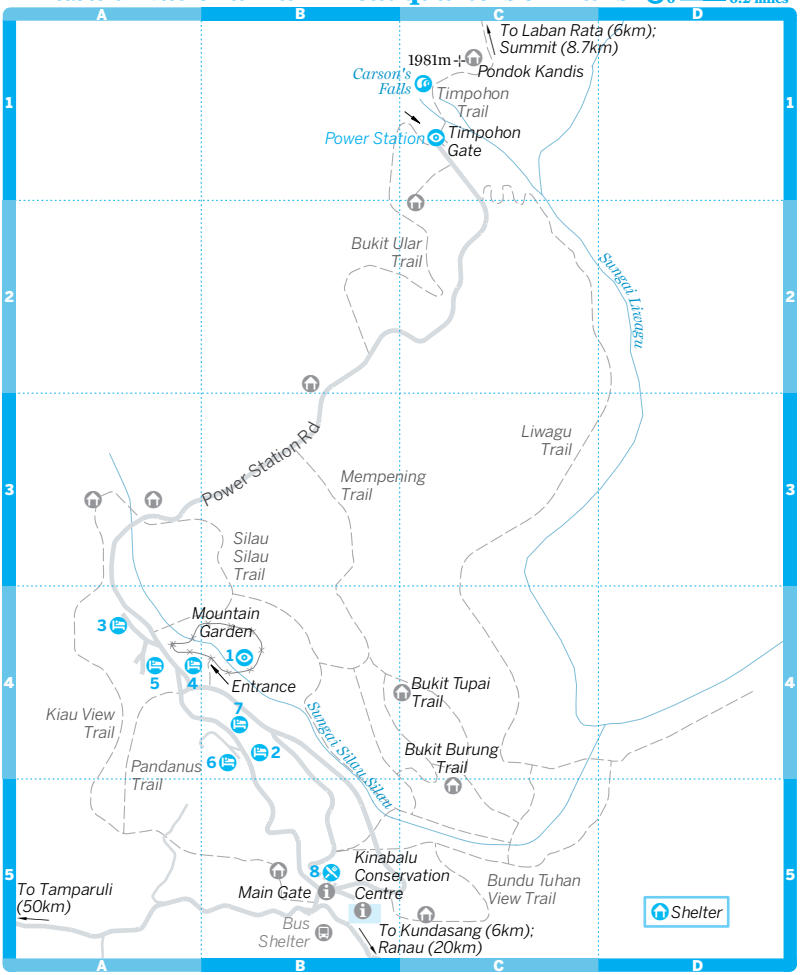
The most common sleeping option is the heated dormitory (bedding included) in the Laban Rata Resthouse, which sells for RM485 per person. If you need privacy, twin shares are available for RM920. Three meals are included in the price. Non-heated facilities surrounding the Laban Rata building are also available for RM415 per person (meals included).

The other option at Laban Rata is to stay at **Pendant Hut**, which is owned and operated by **Mountain Torq** (pricing is on par with Sutera). All guests sleeping at Pendant Hut take two of three meals at Sutera's cafeteria, and are required to participate in (or at least pay for) the *via ferrata* circuit. Pendant Hut is slightly more basic (there's no heat, although climbers sleep in uberwarm sleeping bags). However, there's a bit of a summer-camp vibe here while Laban Rata feels more like a Himalayan orphanage. Prices for Pendant Hut are comparable to Sutera.

Park Headquarters (At the Base)

The following sleeping options are located at the base of the mountain and are operated by Sutera Sanctuary Lodges. They're overpriced compared to sleeping spots just outside the park.

Kinabalu National Park Headquarters & Trails



Kinabalu National Park Headquarters & Trails

Sights

1 Mountain Garden B4

Sleeping

2 Grace Hostel B4
3 Hill Lodge A4
4 Liwagu Suites A4
5 Nepenthes Villa A4
6 Peak Lodge B4
7 Rock Hostel B4

Eating

Liwagu Restaurant ..... (see 4)
8 Restoran Kinabalu Balsam B5

Grace Hostel

HOSTEL $$

(Map p329; dm RM192) Clean, comfortable 20-bed dorm with fireplace and drink-making area.

Hill Lodge

CABIN $$$

(Map p329; cabin RM580) These semidetached cabins are a good option for those who can't face a night in the hostels. They're clean and comfortable, with private bathrooms.

Liwagu Suites HOTEL **$$$**
(Map p329; ste RM700) These hotel-like rooms (four in total) can be found in the Liwagu Building. While they sleep up to four people, they're best for couples as they contain only one bedroom and one living room.

Nepenthes Villa HOTEL, LODGE **$$$**
(Map p329; lodge RM1078) These two-storey units fall somewhere between hotel rooms and private lodges. They have two bedrooms (one with a twin bed, one with a queen) and verandahs offering limited mountain views.

Peak Lodge UNIT **$$$**
(Map p329; lodge RM940) These semidetached units have two bedrooms (one with a bunk bed and one with two twin beds), pleasant sitting rooms, fireplaces and nice views from their verandahs.

Rock Hostel HOSTEL **$$**
(Map p329; dm RM192) Somewhat institutional 20-bed hostel.

Eating

LABAN RATA (ON THE MOUNTAIN)
At Laban Rata the cafeteria-style restaurant in the **Laban Rata Resthouse** has a simple menu and also offers buffet meals coordinated with the usual climbing times. Most hikers staying at Laban Rata (either in one of Sutera's huts or at Pendant Hut) have three meals (dinner, breakfast and lunch) included in their accommodation packages. It is possible to negotiate a price reduction if you plan on bringing your own food (boiling water can be purchased for RM1 if you bring dried noodles). Note: you will have to lug said food up to Laban Rata. Buffet meals can also be purchased individually – dinner costs RM45. A counter in the dining area sells soft drinks, chocolate, pain relievers and postcards.

PARK HEADQUARTERS (AT THE BASE)
Restoran Kinabalu Balsam CAFETERIA **$$**
(Map p329; dishes RM5-15; ⏲6am-10pm, to 11pm weekends) The cheaper and more popular of the two options in the park is this canteen-style spot directly below the park HQ. It offers basic but decent Malaysian, Chinese and Western dishes at reasonable prices. There is also a small but well-stocked shop in Balsam selling tinned and dried foods, chocolate, beer, spirits, cigarettes, T-shirts, bread, eggs and margarine.

Liwagu Restaurant CAFETERIA **$$**
(Map p329; dishes RM10-30; ⏲6am-10pm, to 11pm weekends) In the visitors centre, there's a huge range of dishes, including noodles, rice and seafood standards. An 'American breakfast' is pretty ordinary here.

Getting There & Away

It is highly advised that summit-seekers check in at the park headquarters by 9am, which means if you're coming from KK, you should plan to leave by 7am, or consider spending the night somewhere near the base of the mountain.

Bus

Express buses (RM25) leave KK from the Utara Terminal bus station every hour on the hour from 7am to 10am and at 12:30pm, 2pm and 3pm, and leaves at the same times in the reverse directions; minivans (RM15) leave from the same area when full. A shuttle bus (RM40) also runs from the Pacific Sutera (9am), the Magellan Sutera (9.10am) and Wisma Sabah (9.20am) to Kinabalu National Park HQ, arriving at 11.30am (RM40). In the reverse direction, it leaves Kinabalu National Park HQ at 3.30pm. There is also a shuttle bus from Kinabalu National Park HQ to Poring Hot Springs at noon (RM25) and another at 3.30pm (RM25) to Mesilau Nature Resort. Express buses and minivans travelling between KK and Ranau (and Sandakan) pass the park turn-off, 100m uphill from the park entrance. You can go to Sandakan (RM40) if the bus has room.

Taxi

Share taxis leave KK from Inanam and Padang Merdeka Bus Stations (RM150 to RM200).

Jeep

Share jeeps park just outside of the park gates and leave when full for KK (RM150) and Sandakan (RM400); each jeep can hold around five passengers, but they can be chartered by individuals.

Around Mt Kinabalu

Kinabalu National Park is home to Borneo's highest mountain and some of the island's best-preserved forest. Most travellers make a beeline for the mountain and the main park headquarters area, but the following spots are also worth exploring:

MESILAU NATURE RESORT
This lovely slice of country is the trailhead for an alternative approach up Mt Kinabalu, often favoured by trekkers as it's more challenging than the main route and much less crowded than park headquarters. The

Mesilau route wanders up the mountain and links up with the Timpohon route to continue the ascent to Laban Rata. Arrange your trip with (who else?) Sutera Sanctuary Lodges and your guide will meet you at Mesilau.

KUNDASANG MEMORIAL

The junction for the Mesilau Nature Resort on the KK–Ranau Hwy is the site of the **Kundasang War Memorial** (admission RM10; ⏲8am-5.30pm), which commemorates the Australian and British prisoners who died on the infamous Sandakan Death Marches. Four gardens, manicured in that bucolic yet tame fashion that is so very English, are separated by a series of marbled pavilions. In the Anzac Garden you can see a full list of the dead and at the back of the gardens is a viewpoint that offers a stunning view of Mt Kinabalu.

The memorial is in Kundasang, 6km east of Kinabalu National Park headquarters. You'll know you're in Kundasang when you see the market stalls on either side of the road. Take the turn on the left for Mesilau Nature Resort. The memorial is on the right 150m after the turn-off. Look for the flags and the stone fort-like structure above the road.

RANAU

Ranau is a collection of concrete shop blocks on the road between KK and Sandakan. There's a busy Saturday **night market**, but otherwise this a good town for passing through: rampant construction is scarring the lovely valley it sits in. That said, there is a podiatry experience here you don't want to miss (we don't often use those words). After your epic Kinabalu climb, head to **Tagal Sungai Moroli** (admission RM10) in Kampung Luanti for a truly unique massage experience. The term *tagal* means 'no fishing' in the local Kadazan-Dusun language, as the fish in the river (a species known locally as *ikan pelian*) are not to be captured – they are special massage fish. The townsfolk claim that they've trained the little swimmers to gently nibble at weary feet.

Sights

Sabah Tea Garden TEA PLANTATION

(☎440882; www.sabahtea.net; factory tour RM12, with set lunch RM34, 2-day, 1-night package from RM190) A pretty tea plantation that looks like a cluster of giant mossy tussocks huddles in the mountains near Ranau. Contact the tea garden to arrange tours of both the plantation and surrounding rainforests and river valleys. Overnight packages are available; you get to sleep in an on-site property in a tarted-up version of a traditional longhouse. Also offers tours of the facilities coupled with a trip to the fish foot massage (RM110).

PORING HOT SPRINGS

One of the few positive contributions the Japanese made to Borneo during WWII, **Poring Hot Springs** (adult/child RM15/10) has become a popular weekend retreat for locals. The complex is actually part of the Kinabalu National Park, but it's 43km away from the park headquarters, on the other side of Ranau.

The hot springs are located in a well-maintained forest park that does a fine job of giving casual visitors a small slice of the jungle – there's various nature paths and the like that the elderly and children can enjoy. But the springs themselves are not natural puddles. Steaming (seriously, it's hot), sulphurous water is channelled into man-made pools and tubs, some of which feel a little rundown. For some, it's a huge anticlimax, but others enjoy it. Don't forget a towel and your swimming trunks.

For our ringgit, the highlight of the place is actually way above the springs: a **Canopy Walkway** (admission RM15; ⏲9am-4pm) that consists of a series of walkways suspended from trees, up to 40m above the jungle floor, providing unique views of the surrounding forest. Get there early if you want to see birds or other wildlife. A **tropical garden** (adult/child RM3/1.50; ⏲9am-4pm), **butterfly farm** (adult/child RM4/2; ⏲9am-4pm Tue-Sun) and **orchid garden** (adult/child RM10/5; ⏲9am-4pm) are also part of the Poring complex. Rafflesia sometimes bloom in the area; look out for signs in the visitors centre and along the road.

TOP CHOICE Lupa Masa ECO-CAMP $

(☎019-802 0549, SMS advised 016-8068194; www.facebook.com/lupa.masa; dm (stretcher hammock) RM50) About a 10-minute drive from Poring you'll find this incredible ecolodge; the name comes from the Malay for 'forget time', which is pretty easy to do here. The green friendly spot contributes money to local communities and very much caters to independent travellers, which is a bit of a rarity in Sabah. That said, Lupa Masa isn't for everyone. It's rustic here. There are bugs

in the camp and leeches just outside. You get three good meals a day (vegetarian on demand), but there's no TV, no air-con and you're using squat toilets. Accommodation is in raised tents and traditional lodging made from local bamboo, roofed with palm leaves and kitted with stretcher hammocks and mosquito nets. You are in the jungle, folks. On the other hand: *what a jungle*. There are a few 'pools' on the property – incredible natural pools fed by mountain streams and waterfalls where you feel like you're in true, wild Borneo.

The owners offer guided treks and there's a great chance you'll run into local wildlife, especially on night walks. The trekking options include night, day and overnight treks (starting at RM20), as well as jungle survival courses. You can also opt for rooms in a traditional-style longhouse if you want a bit more privacy.

Sleeping outside Kinabalu Park

It's worth spending a night around the base of Kinabalu before your ascent, and there are plenty of accommodation options suiting everyone's budget. All of the following have attached restaurants:

The accommodation at Mesilau and Poring is run by Sutera Sanctuary Lodges with a notable exception. At forested Mesilau, the **lodging** (dm from RM428 per person) is in functional dorms and doubles, but if you want to splurge there are some oddly shaped chalets (they look like they were designed by Frank Gehry on a bad day) that start at RM1285 for a three-bed property. Mesilau Nature Resort is 30 minutes beyond the entrance to Kinabalu (when driving towards Ranau from KK). The Sutera lodging in Poring is located within the hot-springs complex and is same-same in terms of the room experience and prices.

There are privately owned sleeping options looping around Kinabalu's base. Most of these are located along the road between the park headquarters and Kundasang (east of the park's entrance). Two home stays in Kundasang, **Walai Tokou** (☎088-888166, 019-860 2270; koch_homestay@yahoo.com; Ranau; Packages from RM240) and **Mesilou Atamis** (☎017-832 5578, 019-580 2474; http://www.mesilau-homestay.com/; 2-day/1-night packages from RM350; P) are another option.

Wind Paradise YURT $$
(☎714563, 012-820 3360; http://windparadise2011.blogspot.com/; Jln Mesilau, Cinta Mata, Kundasang; d from RM170, yurt (4-person) RM300; P) There are elements of Wind Paradise that resemble just another (albeit well-executed) Mt Kinabalu resort: lodge-y rooms with attractive hardwood floors and an odd mix of modern, minimalist furniture and rather garish bedsheets. Then there are the yurts. If you're scratching your head, a yurt is the traditional tent used by Mongolian nomads. While these ones aren't really suitable for those wanting to pillage Eurasia from Korea to Poland, they are attractive, white-and-blue structures that also come with hardwood floors and cosy beds (one queen and two twins). Almost all lodging, rooms and yurts, comes with great views over the alpine jungle that surrounds Mt Kinabalu.

Mountain Guest House GUESTHOUSE $
(☎888632, 016-837 4040; dm/s/d incl breakfast from RM30/60/70) The closest non-Sutera accommodation to Mt Kinabalu park is about 4km from the trailhead that leads up the mountain. This guesthouse consists of bare but clean rooms plopped into huts and chalets that seem to precariously lean out from the side of Mt Kinabalu. Free breakfast and vegetarian dinners (RM8) are available.

D'Villa Rina Ria Lodge LODGE $$
(☎889282; www.dvillalodge.com.my; dm/r RM30/120; @) This charming lodge is run by friendly staff that maintains cute, cosy rooms and a dining area that overlooks a lovely view over the mountain ranges/thick clouds of afternoon fog, depending on the mercy of the weather gods.

Getting There & Around

Bus & Van

KK round-trip buses stop in front of park headquarters and in Ranau (RM15 to RM20, two hours) from 7am to 8pm. Minivans operate from a blue-roofed shelter in Ranau servicing the nearby attractions (park HQ, Poring etc) for RM5. The national park operates a van service between the headquarters and Poring for RM25 – it leaves the park HQ at noon.

Northwest Coast

The northwest coast of Sabah is criminally underexplored. The A1 runs north from KK to Kudat and the tip of Borneo past wide headlands, rice paddies and hidden beaches.

This is a good area for renting a car or motorbike – the roads are pretty level, and public transport links aren't reliable for getting off the main road.

TUARAN

Tuaran, 33km from KK, is a bustling little town with tree-lined boulevard-style streets and the distinctive nine-storey **Ling Sang Pagoda**, whose approaches are dominated by vividly painted guardian deities. There's little point stopping in the town itself unless you happen to pass through on a market day (Tuaran is likely named for the Malay word *tawaran*, or 'sale', reflecting its history as a trading post), but the surrounding area conceals a few cool sights. You'll see signs for **Mengkabong Water Village**, a Bajau stilt village built over an estuary, but development and pollution has diminished this spot's charms.

Sights & Activities

Rumah Terbalik HOUSE

(The Upside Down House; ☎088-260263; www.upsidedownhouse.com.my/; Kg. Telibong, Batu 21, Jln Telibong Tamparuli; adult/child RM18/5; ⏲8am-10pm Mon-Sun; P) Sabah has many great sights of the natural beauty sort, but very few that we'd call 'quirky'. And then there's Rumah Terbalik: the Upside Down House. Which is like a modern, tastefully designed and decorated house, but...wait for it...upside down! Crazy. Even the furniture and the car parked in the *garage sticks to the ceiling*. This is an amusing spot to visit, as much for the reaction of local Malaysians (who seem to find this place the funniest thing under the sun) as the actual novelty of the place.

Sleeping & Eating

Given the town's proximity to KK (with its heaps of accommodation options), you probably won't need to stay in town. However, if for some reason you need a room, try **Orchid Hotel** (☎012-820 8894, 088-793789; http://www.orchidhotel.netmyne.com/; 4 Jln Teo Teck Ong; r from RM80; ❄). It's somewhat overpriced but it'll do the trick for a night. Just a few doors away is **Tai Fatt** (Jln Teo Teck Ong; meals RM4; ⏲7am-10pm), which has the best *kedai kopi* in Tuaran. It excels at *char mien/mee goreng*, the local, mouth-watering take on Chinese fried noodles, overflowing with vegetables, pork, oil, pork, egg, pork, wheat noodles and, yes, pork.

Shangri La Rasa Ria Resort RESORT $$

(☎088-792888; www.shangri-la.com; Pantai Dalit; r from RM450; P❄@📶🏊) This sister resort of the Shangri La Tanjung Aru Resort in Kota Kinabalu occupies a fine stretch of peach-hued dunes about 45 minutes north of the KK airport. It's a sprawling resort complete with its own 18-hole golf course, several fine restaurants, an amoeba-esque pool and a relaxing spa. The resort's best feature is the small nature sanctuary.

Getting There & Away

All buses north pass through Tuaran, and minivans shuttle regularly to and from KK (RM5 to RM10, 30 minutes). Minivans to Mengkabong are less frequent and cost RM1. Regular minivans go from Tuaran to Kota Belud (around RM15, 30 minutes).

KOTA BELUD

You might think Kota Belud isn't much to look at, and frankly, you'd be right, but the town's Sunday **tamu**, or market, is definitely worth your time. It's a congested, colourful and dusty melee of vendors, hagglers, browsers, gawpers and hawkers, all brought together by a slew of everyday goods in a bustle that consumes the whole town every

DON'T MISS

THE ORANG-UTANS OF SHANGRI-LA

Sounds like a movie starring adorable primates in Tibet, right? No, we're just referring to the Sanctuary at Shangri-La's Rasa Ria Resort, sister resort of the Shangri La Tanjung Aru Resort in Kota Kinabalu, located near Tuaran.

The Sanctuary is a makeshift wildlife reserve owned and managed by the resort. There's all kinds of daily activities, from bird-watching trips to night walks (there are civets and loris on the reserve) to viewing the Sanctuary's orang-utans from a canopy walkway. Honestly, the red apes here are just as cute as the ones at Sepilok (p343), and it's way less crowded as well. Plus, your money is stll going towards a preservation organisation. There's different rates for all of the above activities depending on whether or not you're a guest at the hotel; for more information, email rrr@shangri-la.com or call 88-797888. The two-hour orang-utan viewing occurs daily at 10am.

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

A DETACHED SENSE OF FEAR

If you're out at night in Kota Belud and hear a strange noise, or happen to be either pregnant or a newborn infant, get inside. Because you may become the next victim of the *penanggalan,* Kota Belud's resident phantasm. The *penanggalan* ("detach"), known locally as the *balan-balan*, to Westerners is an odd monster: a mix of banshee, vampire and biology experiment. By day it appears to be a beautiful young woman; at night it is also a beautiful young woman, or at least the head of one. The rest of the 'body' is a trailing mass of intenstines and other internal organs. The *balan-balan* is said to seek the scent of newborn flesh and the blood (and placentas) of pregnant women. There's a pretty great 2011 Malaysian horror movie on the subject called *Penanggal*, complete with flying heads, lots of screaming and folks getting eaten.

week (and a smaller version takes place on Wednesdays!). The most impressive site in Kota Belud is sadly an uncommon one these days: a procession of fully caparisoned Bajau horsemen from the nearby villages, decked out, along with their steeds, in vivid, multi-coloured satin 'armour'.

A *tamu* is not simply a market where villagers gather to sell their farm produce and to buy manufactured goods from traders; it's also a social occasion where news and stories are exchanged. These days tourists now often outnumber buffalo, and the horsemen have mostly moved away from the car park, though some do put on a show for visitors.

Visitors looking for tribal handicrafts and traditional clothing may find a prize here, but it's cheaply made stuff for tourists. Ironically, the best way to experience this commercial event is to come not expecting to buy anything – soak up the convivial, occasionally manic atmosphere, enjoy a good meal at the lovely food stalls and just potter about like Grandma at a Sunday flea market.

Sleeping & Eating

Most people visit Kota Belud as a day trip from KK, since you can make it there and back with plenty of time for the market.

Kota Belud is hardly a gastronome's delight, but tasty snacks can be picked up at the Sunday market. There are plenty of Chinese and halal coffee shops around the municipal offices.

TOP CHOICE Mañana GUESTHOUSE **$$**
(☎014-679 2679, 014-679 3679; www.manana-borneo.com; hammock/r/ste from RM50/70/150) This fantastic property is in the little village of Kampung Pituru Laut, way out on the coast. The name comes from a Canadian guest, who was so enchanted with the resort he kept putting off leaving till mañana…then mañana…then mañana… Owners Yan and Nani have situated the property on a private, boat-only-accesible beach that is basically a slice of heaven buttered with paradise. Simple, cleverly designed chalets look out onto clear water, hammocks sway in the ocean breeze, an on-site restaurant-bar serves hot food and cold beer, and the sunsets will blow your mind. Ask about diving trips to see what may be the world's largest brain coral. The owners prefer you book ahead so transport can be arranged; their suggested agent in KK is the excellent GogoSabah (p311).

Kota Belud Travelers' Lodge LODGE **$**
(☎088-977228; http://mykbtl.com; 6 Plaza Kong Guan; r without bathroom RM65, en suite RM85-115; ❄) A simple affair in the centre of town, it's about 200m southwest of the mosque in a shopping block (it's well marked, so finding it shouldn't be a problem). It's got the whole concrete-block-with-cosy-rooms vibe going that is oddly typical of interior Sabah hotels.

Getting There & Away

MINIBUS & TAXI

Minivans and share taxis gather in front of Pasar Besar, the old market. Most of these serve the Kota Belud–KK route, (RM7 to RM10, two hours) or Kudat (RM10 to RM15, two hours), departing from 7am to 5pm. To get to Kinabalu National Park, take any minibus going to KK and get off at Tamparuli, about halfway (RM5, 30 minutes). There are several minivans from Tamparuli to Ranau every day until about 2pm; all pass the park entrance (RM5, one hour). To go all the way to Ranau costs RM13 (the trip takes just over an hour).

KUDAT

Despite being only a few hours from Kota Kinabalu, there's a dreamy, end-of-the-world feeling in Kudat. Maybe it's the drowsy quality of the air; Malaysian towns don't get much more laid-back and friendly than this. You can thank the local Rungus people. Filipinos too – there's loads of them around.

Kudat is a quiet port that rewards a bit of initiative. The town itself is fairly unremarkable; there is a large **Chinese temple** (admission free) by the main square and a **fish market** near the docks, but mainly this is a quiet place where it's nice to potter about, smile at people and be smiled at. It's the country that leads up to the tip of Borneo that you want to explore. There are miles and miles of beautiful beaches about, some of which are excellent for surfing, while others are good for watching lonely cattle and blood-red sunsets. The trick is finding these spots, as there's very little tourism infrastructure to speak of.

You can disappear down side roads that lead to the ocean and see what you find – we did and had a grand time, but we had our own wheels. We're purposely suggesting you do it yourself as there is such unreliable road signage here, yet not too many roads. Trust us when we say that with a little exploratory gusto you might find that mythical traveller pot of gold: the hidden, untouched beach. Swing by **New Way Car Rental & Souvenir Centre** (☎088-625868; 40 Jln Lo Thien Chok) if you want to explore the area under your own steam. Staff can also book your accommodation on Pulau Banggi.

Sleeping & Eating

TOP CHOICE Tampat Do Aman ECO-CAMP $

(☎013-880 8395; http://tampatdoaman.com/; r from RM30;) Tampat Do Aman means 'place of friends' in the local Rungus language. It's a fitting title; you'll be made to feel welcome as hell here by Howard Stanton and his Rungus wife. The couple are committed to creating sustainable tourism in the area, and work with the local Rungus community to preserve some of Kudat's lovely beaches and stretches of jungle. Howard will hook you up with bicycles and car rides out to some of the most isolated, lovely beaches in Sabah – ask to see the honeymooners' point, or for tips on snorkeling spots. Tampat Do Aman itself is a very rustic eco-camp, with fan-cooled basic thatch huts and longhouse, set in a supremely romantic spot between the jungle and the ocean. The staff provides nice home-cooked meals (and plenty of beer) on demand.

Tip of Borneo Resort RESORT $$

(Tommy's Place; ☎013-811 2315, 088-493468; http://tipofborneoresort.com/; r RM130-160;) If you're not into the rustic camp atmoshere, head to Tommy's Place, the Tip of Borneo Resort. This is an excellent property of wonderful villas and chalets set up with sweeping views of the Kudat headlands. Staff are committed to preserving natural beauty and have engaged in projects to help sea turtles lay their eggs. You can look into diving, windsurfing and other activities here, and management is happy to direct you to awesome beaches.

TOP CHOICE Hibiscus Riviera VILLA $$$

(☎019-895 074; www.hibiscusvillaborneo.com; villas from US$800;) The Hibiscus looks like the place where Jay-Z and *GQ* magazine would throw the mother of all Southeast Asian parties. It's tasteful – dark-wood floors, indigenous art, scrubbed pebbles and an incredible infinity pool – yet unmistakably, impeccably upper class. In short, this is one of the finest top-end accomodation options in Sabah. From late December to early January the rate climbs to US$1100 a night (US$1030 without breakfast) and there is a minimum 3-night stay rule.

Ria Hotel HOTEL $$

(☎088-622794; http://riahotel.blogspot.com/; 3 Jln Marudu; r RM120-275;) If you have to stay in Kudat town, the Ria has clean, spacious, well-appointed rooms, nice bathrooms with hot showers, and little balconies. It's a short walk southwest of the bus station.

Getting There & Away

The bus station is in Kudat Plaza in the western part of town, very close to the Ria Hotel. Bus destinations include KK (RM25, three hours) and Kota Belud (RM15, 1½ hours). Minivans and jeeps also operate from here; a ride to KK in a full van will cost around RM45.

AROUND KUDAT

The area around Kudat includes many hidden coves, beaches and hill trails that are almost all tucked away down hidden or unmarked roads. You'll want to get in touch with the folks at Tampat Do Aman or Tip of Borneo Resort to find the best spots. You can attempt some of the side roads in

a 2WD or motorbike, but be careful, especially if it's been raining (which doesn't happen often; this is the driest part of Sabah). Either way, make sure you take in one of the lovely tropical sunsets – Sabah's west coast is famous for 'em! The **Rungus longhouses** (Bavanggazo Rungus Longhouses/Maranjak Longhouse; ☎088-621673, 612846; per person per night from RM70) of Kampung Bavanggazo, 44km south of Kudat, are highly touted by Sabah Tourism, but were in a bit of a neglected state when we visited them.

TIP OF BORNEO

Sabah's northernmost headland, at the end of a wide bay some 40km from Kudat, is known as Tanjung Simpang Mengayu, or the Tip of Borneo. Magellan reputedly landed here for 42 days during his famous round-the-world voyage. Once a wild promontory, this windswept stretch where the cliffs meet the sea has been co-opted as a tourist attraction – there's a large, truncated globe monument dominating the viewpoint. A sign warns visitors not to climb down onto the rocks that form the mainland's actual tip, effectively guaranteeing that tourists will do exactly that. Seriously, please don't attempt to swim here; a Korean tourist drowned during our research.

There's no public transport, so you'll need to negotiate a taxi from Kudat (around RM90, including waiting time upon arrival) or drive yourself.

Offshore Islands

The real highlights of northwestern Sabah lie offshore. The first gem is Pulau Mantanani, perfect tropical islands lying about 40km northwest of Kota Belud. The second is Layang Layang, a diving mecca about 300km northwest of KK – it's basically just an airstrip built on a reef way out in the middle of the South China Sea. Famous for great visibility, seemingly endless wall dives and the occasional school of hammerheads, it's second only to Sipadan on Malaysia's list of top dive spots.

PULAU MANTANANI

Pulau Mantanani Besar (Big Mantanani Island) and **Pulau Mantanani Kecil** (Little Mantanani Island) are two little flecks of land fringed by bleach-blond sand and ringed by a halo of colourful coral, about 25km off the coast of northwest Sabah (about 40km northwest of Kota Belud).

Those on a budget – well, actually, anyone – should opt for the excellent **Mari Mari Backpackers Lodge** (☎088-260501; www.riverbug.asia; dm RM60, r RM80-175), operated by Riverbug. Guests are placed in raised stilt chalets pocketed around a white-sand beach. The huts are a modern take on the thatch-longhouse theme, and a well executed one at that. Diving and snorkelling activities feature high on the itinerary list, but this is also a lovely tropical escape if you just want to chill.

PULAU BANGGI

If you want to fall off the map, get out to Pulau Banggi, which lies some 40km northeast of Kudat. The Banggi people, known locally for their unusual tribal treehouses, are Sabah's smallest indigenous group, and speak a unique non-Bornean dialect. The island is a postcard-esque slice of sand, tropical trees and clear water, and is actually one of the largest offshore islands in all of Malaysia.

Accommodation is provided by a small government **resthouse** (r RM40) and the modest **Banggi Resort** (☎019-587 8078; r fan/air-con RM50/65, huts RM70; ❄), which can arrange boat trips and other activities. The small huts have kitchens and twin beds – make sure you request the charming treehouse hut. This place can get fully booked on weekends, so reserve in advance. At either location, ask staff about the trails that lead into the small jungle interior of the island.

Kudat Express (☎088-328118; one-way RM15) runs a ferry between Kudat and the main settlement on Pulau Banggi. It departs the pier (near the Shell station) at 9am and 2pm daily. In the reverse direction, it leaves Pulau Banggi daily at around 3pm.

LAYANG LAYANG

Some 300km northwest of Kota Kinabalu, Layang Layang is a tiny island that is surrounded by a coral atoll. It's an exclusive **dive location**, and is well known among scubaholics as part of the famous Borneo Banks. Thanks to its utter isolation, the reef here is healthy and diverse. Although it may not be quite as colourful as the reef at Sipadan, it's quite likely to be one of the most unspoilt bits of coral most divers have seen. There are plenty of reef fish and reef sharks, as well as a with a healthy population of rays.

Please note: there is *no decompression chamber* at Layang Layang, so don't press your luck while underwater. The resort only provides air – no nitrox. Trivia buffs may be pleased to know Layang Layang is the only one of the remote Spratly Islands that receives regular flights.

Layang Layang Island Resort (in Kuala Lumpur 03-2170 2185; www.avillionlayanglayang.com; 6-day, 5-night all-inclusive package twin-share per person from US$1490;) is the only game in town here and it's all about the diving. The five daily meals are scheduled around the dive times. The standard rooms are very comfortable, with air-con, TV, private verandahs and hot-water showers. The all-inclusive packages include accommodation, food, 12 boat dives and tank usage. Package rates for nondivers start at US$850. An extra night costs diver/nondiver $180/$125. Be warned, nondivers: besides a little snorkelling, there's nothing for you to do here but sunbathe.

The resort operates its own Antonov 26 aircraft, which flies every Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday between KK and Layang Layang. The flight over from KK in this barebones Russian prop plane is a big part of the adventure: it feels more like a military transport than a commercial airliner. The return flight costs US$285, which is not included in the accommodation-food-dive package.

EASTERN SABAH

Eastern Sabah takes nearly everything that is wonderful about the rest of Borneo and condenses it into one hard-hitting brew of an outdoor shot consisting of equal parts adventure, wildlife, undersea exploration and flat-out fun. Let's tick off some of the natural wonders that are packed into this relatively tiny corner of the island: the great ginger men – ie the orang-utans – of Sepilok; pot-bellied, flop-nosed proboscis monkeys in Labuk Bay; the looming vine tunnels and muddy crocodile highway of the Sungai Kinabatangan; pygmy elephants and treetop canopies that scratch in the sky in the Danum Valley and Tabin; plunging seawalls rainbow-spattered with tropical marine life in the Semporna Archipelago; a forest as old as human civilisation in the Maliau Basin.

Did we just pique your travel appetite? Yeah, we thought so. With easier transport links and improved infrastructure, it's easier than ever to hit up the east side of Sabah. You'll be told, when you're here, that the only way around is via package tours, but trust us – with a little prior planning and a bit of heart, you can explore this area independently and in-depth.

Sandakan

POP 480,000

Sabah's second city lacks the small cosmopolitan pulse that keeps KK throbbing; in contrast, Sandakan feels like a provincial city with provincial horizons, not to mention a grubby city centre. But Sandakan was once a major port of call, and as such it has played an important role in Borneo's past, as attested by religious relics, haunting cemeteries and stunning colonial mansions.

Sights

Central Sandakan is light on 'must-see' attractions, although history buffs will appreciate the *Sandakan Heritage Trail* brochure available at the tourist office. The centre, where you'll find most hotels, banks and local transport, consists of a few blocks squashed between the waterfront and a steep escarpment from where you can look out over the bay (Teluk Sandakan). Warning: don't go to Sandakan Crocodile Park unless you like watching sadly neglected reptiles.

Chinese Cemetery CEMETERY

Sandakan's massive Chinese Cemetery essentially takes up all of a valley that runs into the hills east of Sandakan. Gravesites are studded into the slopes, many shaped by *feng shui* principles so that the back of the grave backs into the solid angle of the earth, while the front often features a small artificial pool, reflecting the traditional Chinese belief that an ideal home has a mountain behind it and running water in front. As you wander further along the cemetery, the graves become older and more decrepit – many have been claimed by the jungle. You will also see some charnel houses that accommodate the important members of Sandakan's major Chinese clans. Across the road from the cemetery is a cremation ground for Hindus and Sikhs.

Japanese Cemetery CEMETERY

Located beyond the Chinese cemetery grounds, this is a poignant piece of Sandakan's ethnic puzzle. The gravesite was founded in the 1890s by Kinoshita Kuni, known to the English as Okuni of South Seas

Sandakan

Sandakan

Sights

1 Agnes Keith House B1

Activities, Courses & Tours

2 Sepilok Tropical Wildlife Adventure D2
3 SI Tours C3
Wildlife Expeditions ..... (see 3)

Sleeping

4 Nak Hotel B3
5 Rose Guesthouse C2
6 Sandakan Backpackers C3
7 Sea View Sandakan Budget & Backpackers Hotel D3
8 Swiss-Inn Waterfront Sandakan D3

Eating

9 English Tea House & Restaurant B1
10 Habeeb Restaurant C2
11 New Market D3

Drinking

Balin ..... (see 4)

and to greater Sandakan as the successful madam-manager of the lucrative 'Brothel 8', once located on Lebuh Tiga. Today the cemetery is quite small, but at one time there were hundreds of buried dead, most of them prostitutes. A monument to the fallen Japanese soldiers of WWII was erected in the cemetery in 1989. To get here and to the Chinese cemetery, climb the shady Tangga Seribu to Jln Residensi Dr and turn right; there will be signs pointing the rest of the way to the cemetery.

Agnes Keith House MUSEUM

(Map p338; ☎089-221140; Jln Istana; admission RM15; ⏲9am-5pm) On the hill above town, overlooking Teluk Sandakan and the city itself, is Agnes Keith House, an old two-storey wooden villa now renovated as a museum. Keith was an American who came to Sandakan in the 1930s with her husband, then Conservator of Forests, and ended up writing several books about her experiences, including the famous *Land Below the Wind*. The house fell into disrepair during the 1990s, but Sabah Museum has since restored it as a faithful recreation of Keith's original abode.

The villa documents Sandakan in all its colonial splendour, with detailed displays on the lives of the Keiths. Most poignant are mementos of Agnes' imprisonment by the Japanese during WWII, when she had to try to care for her young son under gruelling conditions. There's some great vintage photographs, including a shot of Keith's husband standing with a dead elephant in full *Heart of Darkness* safari gear. The admission price includes entry to the various branches of the Sabah Museum in KK – now didn't we tell you to keep hold of your ticket? Also on the grounds is the English Tea House & Restaurant, conveniently ignoring Keith's American background and the fact that she found Sandakan to be 'too British' when she first arrived.

To reach the museum, follow Jln Singapura from the city centre and turn right up the hill, or head up the Tangga Seribu (100 Steps) to Jln Istana and turn left. Just below the museum gardens is an **observation pavilion** built by the local Rotary Club, which offers more fine views.

Sandakan Memorial Park HISTORIC SITE

(⏲9am-5pm) This park marks the site of a Japanese POW camp and starting point for the infamous WWII 'death marches' to Ranau. Of the 1800 Australian and 600 British troops imprisoned here, the only survivors by July 1945 were six Australian escapees. Today the site of the POW camp has been converted into a quiet forest orchard and series of gardens.

Large, rusting machines testify to the camp's forced-labour program, and a pavilion at the park's centre includes accounts from survivors and photographs from personnel, inmates and liberators. In 2006 the original march route was officially reopened as a memorial trail – see www.sandakan-deathmarch.com for details.

To reach the park, take any Batu 8 (or higher-numbered) bus from the local bus station in the city centre (RM1.80); get off at the 'Taman Rimba' signpost and walk down Jln Rimba. A taxi from downtown costs about RM25 one way.

Puu Jih Shih Temple TEMPLE

(Off Jln Leila) Architecturally, the Puu Jih Shih is one of the finer Chinese temples in Sabah: wrapped in the usual firework-colour display of reds, golds and twining dragons, festooned with lanterns that illuminate the grounds like a swarm of fat fireflies. As an added bonus, this large Buddhist temple is perched on a steep hill overlooking Teluk Sandakan, offering an extremely impressive view of the city. Take a bus to Tanah Merah and ask for directions; from where you depart the bus it's not a far walk, but it's a steep uphill one. A taxi here shouldn't cost more than RM6 one way, but don't be surprised if cabbies try to charge RM20 for a round-trip plus waiting at the temple.

St Michael's & All Angels Church CHURCH

(Off Jln Puncak) This incongruous slice of the Home Counties is one of the few all-stone buildings in Malaysian Borneo and the former locus of colonial worship. In 1893, prison labourers lugged said stones across the jungle during the church's construction. Today, despite a little mouldering, the church very much looks like a displaced bit of the Cotswolds transplanted into the heart of Borneo. Although the church is officially off Jln Puncak, many people call the street 'Church Rd'.

Sam Sing Kung TEMPLE

(Jln Padang) The Sam Sing Kung temple (also pronounced 'Sam Sing Gong') dates from 1887, making it the oldest building in Sandakan. The name means 'three saints' temple – in this case saints for general righteousness, fishermen and students (easy to see how the latter two would be important to Sandakan's education-oriented, dependent-on-the-sea Chinese community). The temple itself is a smallish, if attractive affair – a lovely example of a house of worship dedicated to the traditional Chinese Taoist pantheon.

Kampong Buli Sim Sim VILLAGE

This traditional stilt village, located about 4km east of the town centre, is the original settlement Sandakan grew from. You'll likely be grinned at as you wander around

THE SANDAKAN DEATH MARCHES

Sandakan was the site of a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp during WWII, and in September 1944 there were 1800 Australian and 600 British troops interned here. What is not widely known is that more Australians died here than during the building of the infamous Burma Railway.

Early in the war, food and conditions were bearable and the death rate stood at around three per month. However, as the Allies closed in, it became clear to the officers in command that they didn't have enough staff to guard against a rebellion in the camps. They decided to cut the prisoners' rations to weaken them, causing disease to spread and the death rate to rise.

It was also decided to move the prisoners inland – 250km through the jungle to Ranau, on a route originally cut by locals to hamper the Japanese invaders, passing mainly through uninhabited, inhospitable terrain. On 28 January 1945, 470 prisoners set off; 313 made it to Ranau. On the second march, 570 started from Sandakan; just 118 reached Ranau. The 537 prisoners on the third march were the last men in the camp.

Conditions on the marches were deplorable: most men had no boots, rations were less than minimal and many men fell by the wayside. The Japanese brutally disposed of any prisoners who couldn't walk. Once in Ranau, the surviving prisoners were put to work carrying 20kg sacks of rice over hilly country to Paginatan, 40km away. Disease, starvation and executions took a horrendous toll, and by the end of July 1945 there were no prisoners left in Ranau. The only survivors from the 2400 at Sandakan were six Australians who escaped, either from Ranau or during the marches.

As a final bitter irony, it emerged postwar that a rescue attempt had been planned for early 1945, but intelligence at the time had suggested there were no prisoners left at the camp.

the wooden boards built over the water, as much an oddity to locals as their water village is to you. Have a stroll, be on the lookout for those budding entrepreneurs who have turned their homes into ad hoc souvenir shops, but please don't take pictures of people without asking permission. You can take a taxi here for no more than RM15.

Tours

It is possible to visit many of the attractions around Sandakan independently, but if you want to stay at the river lodges on the Kinabatangan, you'll need to prebook accommodation. It's advisable to do so in Sandakan or in KK (p322). Sandakan also has plenty of general tour operators offering packages to Sepilok and the Gomantong Caves. Hotels in Sandakan and Sepilok are all capable of booking tours as well, as are many of the tour companies we list in KK. Borneo Express (p319), in KK, has an office in Sandakan, as does **Sandakan Car Rental** (☎019-823 7050, 016-815 0029; sandakancarrental.com; Bandar Maju Batu 1, Jln Utara).

Sabah Holidays SIGHTS
(☎089-225718; www.sabahholidays.com; ground fl, Sandakan Airport) Rents cars and minivans, and can arrange tours and accommodation in Kota Belud, the Danum Valley and Maliau Basin.

Sepilok Tropical Wildlife Adventure NATURE
(Map p338; ☎089-271077; www.stwadventure.com; 13 Jln Tiga) This midpriced tour specialist is connected to Sepilok Jungle Resort and Bilit Adventure Lodge on the Sungai Kinabatangan.

SI Tours NATURE
(Map p338; ☎089-213502; www.sitoursborneo.com; Lot 59, Block HS-5, Sandakan Harbour Square Phase 2) This full-service agency operates Abai Jungle Lodge and Kinabatangan Riverside Lodge.

Uncle Tan NATURE
(Map p344; ☎089-535784; www.uncletan.com; Batu 14) Tour menu includes its Sukau River Lodge on the Kinabatangan. Located in Sepilok.

Wildlife Expeditions NATURE
(Map p338; ☎089-219616; www.wildlife-expeditions.com; 9th fl, Wisma Khoo Siak Chiew, Lebuh Empat) Also has accommodation in Sukau. There's also a **KK office** (☎246000; Wisma Merdeka).

Sleeping

Sandakan doesn't bowl folk over in the lodging department, and budget options are sparse. That said, if you can shell out into RM80-and-above territory, there's some decent deals. If you're only passing through Sandakan to see the orang-utans, it's better to stay at Sepilok itself, since the rehabilitation centre is only 25km from town.

Nak Hotel
HOTEL $$

(Map p338; ☎089-272988; www.nakhotel.com; Jln Pelabuhan Lama; s/d incl breakfast from RM85/118; ❄📶) The Nak is a solid midrange hotel that's a fair steal if you're travelling as a couple or with friends, and nice value even if you're by yourself. The oldest dedicated hotel in town has a somewhat Soviet-chic exterior, but once you get inside rooms are quite attractive: nice monochromatic colour schemes with hints of East Asian and Borneo-inspired design flairs. This is a well put-together spot, which is no surprise given the hotel's kick-ass roof lounge, Balin (p342) – a must even if you aren't staying here.

Sea View Sandakan Budget & Backpackers Hotel
HOSTEL $

(Map p338; ☎089-221221; Lot 126, 1st fl, Jln Dua, Harbour Square 14; dm from RM30, r from RM50; ❄📶) The name of this place is a little deceptive; you won't be getting many sea views per se (especially because it seems a new building is going up right on the waterfront). That said, this is an excellent little hostel, with clean, good value rooms, helpful staff and a friendly vibe.

Mark's Lodge
HOTEL $$

(☎089-210055; www.markslodge.com; Lot 1-7, Block 36, Bandar Indah; r from RM154; ❄📶) The word 'boutique' is written in fogged glass across the front entrance – just in case you didn't get the memo. This business-class hotel, located at Batu 4 (Bandar Indah) is a solid option for a comfortable sleep. The rooms are all about the 'dark tropical wood floors plus white sheets' look, and it comes off quite well. It's a RM15 taxi ride into town.

Rose Guesthouse
GUESTHOUSE $

(Map p338; ☎089-223582; www.shsbnb.com; HS10, Harbour Square Complex; dm/d RM20/40, d with bathroom RM47; ❄@) This is no delicate rose with lacy table settings and Devonshire teas. Think more of a modern, somewhat cookie-cutter Sabah budget spot for crashing out. Service is friendly and personable, and fan dorms are dirt cheap (but not dirty). Near the Alliance Bank.

Sandakan Backpackers
HOSTEL $

(Map p338; ☎089-221104; www.sandakanbackpackers.com; Lot 108, Block SH-11, Harbour Square Complex; dm/s/d/tr RM25/40/60/90; ❄@) This place is one of the most popular budget deals in town and a firm fixture on the Borneo backpacker trail. Clean, well-lit, affordable and a decent place to meet other citizens of Backpackistan.

Swiss-Inn Waterfront Sandakan
HOTEL $$

(Map p338; ☎089-240888; www.swissgarden.com; Harbour Square Complex; r from RM161; ❄📶🏊) If you're in the mood for an essentially Western style waterfront resort, the Swiss Garden is where you want to be. Big rooms, standard chain-style upper-class hotel decor, big windows that look out onto the water – there's no surprises here, and we mean that in a good way. A lovely pool, spa and workout facilities are all on-site at this business-class option.

Eating

For an authentic Malay meal, head to the KFC in the waterfront Harbour Square Complex (but don't eat there!) – the restaurants surrounding it are cheap and flavourful. Most are standard Malay *kedai kopi*, with prices that rarely top RM6 per mains; all are open from roughly 9am to 9pm. **Habeeb Restaurant** (Map p338; Jln Tiga) is good for a cheap curry; it's actually part of a chain that serves good Indian Muslim food, so if you see other branches around town, consider them a solid bet.

New Market
FOOD STALLS $

(Map p338; Jln Pryor; dishes RM3-10; ⏲7am-2pm) Despite being located in what looks like a multistorey car park, this is the best spot in town for cheap eats and stall food. On the bottom floor you'll find the usual 'wet' and 'dry' markets, selling fish, sea cucumber, herbs, vegetables, meat and such. Farmers and fishermen rock up here from their fields and boats throughout the day, bringing fresh produce, bloody butchered meat and flopping denizens of the ocean. Upstairs you'll find strictly halal food stalls, with a mix of Chinese, Malay, Indonesian and Filipino stalls. Hours given for the food stalls above are a bit flexible, but by 3pm most are empty.

Sim Sim Seafood Restaurant SEAFOOD $

(Sim Sim 8; dishes RM5; ⏲8am-2pm) Located in the heart of the Sim Sim stilt village, this 'restaurant' is more of a dockside fishery, where the daily catch is unloaded and sorted and prepared for the immediate consumption of travellers like you (and a lot of locals). A cluster of red plastic patio furniture huddles in the corner – just grab a seat and point to your prey! Or ask a friendly regular for help ordering; there are lots of off-menu specialities determined by what's caught that day. Ask a cab to drop you off at 'Sim Sim Bridge 8' (they'll very likely know where you're going).

English Tea House & Restaurant TEA HOUSE $$$

(Map p338; ☎089-222544; www.englishteahouse.org; 2002 Jln Istana; mains RM24-40, cocktails RM26.50; ⏲breakfast, lunch & dinner) It seems every place that suffered under colonialism likes to recreate the atmosphere of being a rich colonialist, the English Tea House being Sabah's contribution to the genre. Don your safari suit, wax that moustache and butter that scone, *sahib*. The manicured gardens are a particular joy, with wicker furniture and a small croquet lawn overlooking the bay, perfect for afternoon tea (RM17.25), a round of sunset Pimms or some ice coffee.

Drinking

Bandar Indah, commonly known as Mile 4 or Batu 4, is a buzzing grid of two-storey shophouses and the playground of choice for locals and expats alike, packed with restaurants, bars, karaoke lounges and nightclubs. It comes alive at night in a way that makes central Sandakan seem deader than the morgue in a ghost town. Bars generally close around 1am or 2am, music venues slightly later.

TOP CHOICE Balin BAR

(Map p338; ☎089-272988; www.nakhotel.com; Nak Hotel, Jln Pelabuhan Lama; drinks from RM9, mains from RM15; ⏲lunch & dinner) Bringing a certain LA rooftop sexiness to Sandakan, Balin is your best bet for nightlife in the city centre. The three tiers of uberchill lounge space are accented by a factory's worth of pillows and some genuinely classy cocktails that any boutique 'mixologist' bar in London or New York would be justifiably jealous of.

Information

Internet

Cyber Café (3rd fl, Wisma Sandakan, Lebuh Empat; per hr RM3; ⏲9am-9pm)

Medical Services

Duchess of Kent Hospital (☎089-212111; http://hdok.moh.gov.my/; Mile 2, Jln Utara) Best private care in the area.

Money

HSBC (Lebuh Tiga)

Maybank (Lebuh Tiga) In addition to a full-service bank and ATM, a sidewalk currency-exchange window is open 9am to 5pm daily for changing cash and travellers cheques.

Standard Chartered Bank (Lebuh Tiga)

Wang Liau Chun Mii Moneychanger (23 Lebuh Tiga; ⏲8.30am-4.30pm) Cash only.

Post

Main post office (☎089-210594; Jln Leila)

Tourist Information

Tourist Information Centre (☎089-229751; Wisma Warisan; ⏲8am-12.30pm & 1.30-4.30pm Mon-Thu, 8-11.30am & 2-4.30pm Friday) Located opposite the municipal offices (known as MPS) and up the stairs from Lebuh Tiga. The staff dispenses advice on everything from regional attractions to local restaurants and can link travellers together for group excursions. One of the more helpful TICs in Sabah.

Getting There & Away

Air

Malaysia Airlines (☎1300-883 000; cnr Jln Pelabuhan Lama & Lebuh Dua & 1st fl, airport) has daily flights to/from KK and KL; its subsidiary, **MASwings**, located in the same office, offers one daily flight to/from Tawau and two to/from KK. **AirAsia** (☎089-222737; 1st & 2nd fl, Airport) operates two daily direct flights to/from KL and KK.

Bus & Minivan

Buses and minibuses to KK, Lahad Datu, Semporna and Tawau leave from the long-distance bus station in a large car park at Batu 2.5, 4km north of town (ie not particularly convenient). Most express buses to KK (RM33 to RM40, six hours) leave between 7am and 2pm, plus one evening departure around 8pm. All pass the turn-off to Kinabalu National Park headquarters.

Buses depart regularly for Lahad Datu (RM20, 2½ hours) and Tawau (RM40, 5½ hours) between 7am and 8am. There's also a bus to Semporna (RM33, 5½ hours) at 8am. If you miss it, head to Lahad Datu, then catch a frequent minivan to Semporna.

GETTING TO THE PHILIPPINES: SANDAKAN TO ZAMBOANGA

Getting to the border Sandakan is a good spot to grab a ferry to the southern Philippines. **Weesam Express** (☎089-212872; ground fl, Hotel New Sabah, Jln Singapura) goes to Zamboanga in the Philippines (1st/2nd class RM260/280) on Tuesday and Friday, leaving Sandakan harbour at 6am and arriving in Zamboanga at 7.30pm the same day. There are ostensibly ferries to Jolo (1st/2nd class RM240/260) and Bongao (1st/2nd class RM220/240), but these weren't running at time of research due to political unrest on those islands. Travellers we spoke to said you didn't need an onward ticket to enter the Philippines, and the Filipino government says otherwise; it's wise to have one just in case.

At the border Once you get to the Philippines, the Filipino government requires you to provide evidence of an onward ticket to enter the country. From Zamboanga you can grab buses to the rest of Mindanao or ferries to the Sulu Archipelago, assuming the security situation in those islands has calmed down.

Minivans depart throughout the morning from Batu 2.5 for Ranau (RM26, four hours) and Lahad Datu (some of those continuing to Tawau). Minivans for Sukau (RM15) leave from a lot behind Centre Point Mall in town.

Getting Around

To/From the Airport

The airport is 11km from the city centre. Batu 7 Airport bus (RM1.80) stops on the main road about 500m from the terminal. A coupon taxi to the town centre costs RM35; going the other way, around RM28.

Bus & Minivan

Buses run from 6am to 6pm on the main road to the north, Jln Utara, designated by how far from town they go, ie Batu 8. Fares range from RM1 to RM4.

Local minivans wait behind Centre Point Mall; fares cost from RM2. Use for the harbour area.

To reach the long-distance bus station, catch a local bus (RM1.50) from the stand at the waterfront; it takes about 20 minutes. The same bus leaves when full from the bus station for the city centre.

Taxi

Short journeys around town should cost RM10; it's about RM15 to Bandar Indah and RM40 to RM50 to Sepilok depending on your bargaining skills. A taxi from the long-distance bus station to town (or vice versa) will probably run RM20; you may be able to argue drivers down to the local fare of RM10.

Sepilok

The orang-utan is the associative species of Sabah, despite the fact that the living space of the beast shrinks annually. The most reliable place to see this primate is the little hamlet of Sepilok, which sees almost as many visitors as the granite spires of Mt Kinabalu. Sepilok's Orang-Utan Rehabilitation Centre (SORC) is the most popular place on earth to see Asia's great ginger ape in its native habitat. Those who have time to stick around will also uncover several scenic nature walks, sanctuaries for the adorable sun bear and elusive proboscis monkey, and a couple of great places to call home for a night or two.

Sights & Activities

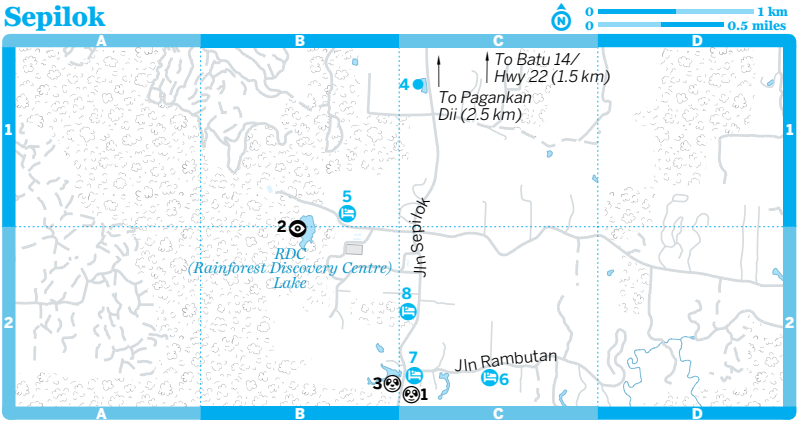
Sepilok Orang-Utan Rehabilitation Centre (SORC) ANIMAL SANCTUARY

(Map p344; ☎089-531180; soutan@po.jaring.my; Jln Sepilok; admission RM30, camera fee RM10; ⏲9-11am & 2-3.30pm, walking trails 9am-4.15pm) One of only four orang-utan sanctuaries in the world, this place occupies a corner of the **Kabili-Sepilok Forest Reserve** about 25km north of Sandakan. The centre was established in 1964; it now covers 40 sq km and has become one of Sabah's top tourist attractions, second only to Mt Kinabalu.

Orphaned and injured orang-utans are brought to Sepilok to be rehabilitated to return to forest life. We have to stress: while thousands of people see orang-utans during feeding time at Sepilok, there is a chance you won't. These are, after all, wild animals. On the bright side, there are two major feeding times a day, so if you miss them in the morning, you can always try again in the afternoon (or the next day).

Feedings are at 10am and 3pm and last 30 to 50 minutes. Schedules are posted at the **visitor reception centre**. Tickets are

Sepilok



Sepilok

Sights

1 Borneo Sun Bear Conservation Centre C2
2 Rainforest Discovery Centre (RDC) B2
3 Sepilok Orang-Utan Rehabilitation Centre (SORC) B2

Activities, Courses & Tours

4 Uncle Tan C1

Sleeping

5 Sepilok B&B B1
6 Sepilok Forest Edge Resort C2
7 Sepilok Jungle Resort C2
8 Sepilok Nature Resort C2

valid for one day, although you can see two feedings in the same day. The morning feeding tends to be more tour-group heavy, so if you want a quieter experience, try the afternoon. Use the lockers for your valuables – orang-utans and macaques have been known to relieve tourists of hats, bags, sunglasses, cameras, even clothing. It's especially important that you don't bring any containers of insect repellent into the reserve, as these are highly toxic to the apes and other wildlife. Spray yourself before entering.

Nature Education Centre

A worthwhile 20-minute video about Sepilok's work is shown five times daily (9am, 11am, noon, 2.10pm and 3.30pm) opposite reception in the auditorium here.

Walking Trails

If you want to explore the sanctuary further, several walking trails lead into the forest; register at the visitor reception centre to use them. Trails range in length from 250m to 4km, and different paths are open at different times of year. Guided night walks can be arranged through the centre or at the various lodges. There's also a 10km trail through mangrove forest to **Sepilok Bay**; this is quite a rewarding walk, and if you're especially fit you may be able to complete it between feeding times. A permit from the **Forestry Department** (☎089-660811, 089-213966; Jln Leila) is required in advance for this route. The department can also arrange basic overnight accommodation at the bay (RM100) or a boat back to Sandakan. Some travel or tour agencies can assist with the permit and other arrangements.

Borneo Sun Bear Conservation Centre

ANIMAL SANCTUARY

(BSBCC; Map p344; ☎089-534491; www.bsbcc.org.my; Jln Sepilok; RM30; ⏲9am-4pm) The sun bear is the smallest of the world's bear species, as well as one of the most threatened. Named for the splotch of yellow fur that spreads like a bright Rorschach across their chests, sun bears, while adorable, also have razor claws that they use to build their nests (which very much resemble orang-utan nests). They are endangered thanks to the usual culprits of habitat loss and Chinese traditional medicine; the latter institution values the bears' bile. In China and Vietnam the beasts are strapped in tiny cages and hooked to IVs that pump bile from their gallbladders.

Thankfully this does not happen in Sabah, although the bears are still under enormous threat from habitat loss.

Set to open to the public in 2013, the BSBCC, at the time of research, cared for some 27 rescued sun bears. The pretty little beasts lumbered and played in open-air forest enclosures; visitors will be able to peek in on their activity from an expertly crafted walkway system. The BSBCC does good work, and is another activity option for tourists to consider when visiting Sepilok. Please note the centre's admissions and opening times may change, as it was not officially open at the time of writing.

Rainforest Discovery Centre (RDC)

NATURE RESERVE

(Map p344; ☎089-533780; www.forest.sabah.gov.my/rdc; adult/child RM10/5; ⏲8am-5pm) The RDC offers an engaging graduate-level education in tropical flora and fauna. Outside the exhibit hall – itself filled with displays that are easily accessible to children – a botanical garden presents varying samples of tropical plant life, the accompanying descriptions every bit as vibrant as the foliage. There's a gentle 1km lakeside walking trail, studded along the way with environmental education signage. A series of eight canopy towers connected by walkways give you a birds-eye view of the green rooftops of the trees, by far the most rewarding element of a trip here. Paddleboats (RM5) are available to ride around the inviting lake near the centre's entrance. You can also book night walks, which afford the chance to spot nocturnal animals like tarsiers and wild cats.

It's best to get there either at 8am or 4pm, as wildlife tends to hibernate during the sweltering hours in the middle of the day. A proper visit along the trails and towers takes around 1½ hours.

Labuk Bay Proboscis Monkey Sanctuary

SANCTURUARY

(☎089-672133; www.proboscis.cc; admission RM 60, camera/video RM10/20) Proboscis monkeys *(Nasalis larvatus)* are an even more exclusive attraction than orang-utans. After all, you can see orang-utans in Sumatra but the proboscis is found only on Borneo, although if you take a close look at them, you'd swear you've spotted one in the corner at a dodgy bar. Named for their long bulbous noses, proboscis monkeys are pot-bellied and red-faced, and males are constantly, unmistakably…aroused. With the arrival of Europeans, Malays nicknamed the proboscis *monyet belanda* (Dutch monkey). Because of their diets, proboscis monkeys tend to have severe flatulence, another attractive element of this already most graceful of species. Jokes aside, the proboscis are oddly compelling, and one of nine totally protected species in Sabah.

THE WILD MAN OF BORNEO & HOW TO HELP HIM

The term 'orang-utan' literally means 'man of the wild', or 'jungle man' – a testament to the local reverence for these great ginger apes. Traditionally orang-utans were never hunted like other creatures in the rainforest; in fact, Borneo's indigenous people used to worship their skulls in the same fashion as they did the heads taken from enemy tribesmen. Orang-utans are the only species of great ape found outside Africa. A mature male is an impressive, not to mention hairy, creature with an arm span of 2.25m, and can weigh up to 144kg. Dominant males also have distinctive wide cheek pads to reinforce their alpha status. It was once said that an orang-utan could swing from tree to tree from one side of Borneo to the other without touching the ground. Sadly this is no longer the case, and hunting and habitat destruction continue to take their toll; it's estimated fewer than 15,000 specimens now exist in the wild.

If you'd like to get involved with the work of the Sepilok Orang-utan Rehabilitation Centre, contact **Sepilok Orang-Utan Appeal UK** (www.orangutan-appeal.org.uk) a UK-based charity. The Appeal's orang-utan adoption scheme is a particular hit with visitors: for UK£30 a year you can sponsor a ginger bundle of fun and receive updates on its progress; see the Appeal's website for details. If you're really taken with the place, Sepilok has one of the most popular overseas volunteer programs in Malaysia. Apply through **Travellers Worldwide** (www.travellersworldwide.com); as of recently, the cost of an eight-week volunteer package, including accommodation, meals and a number of excursions, was UK£3345.

A local palm-plantation owner has created a private proboscis monkey sanctuary, attracting the floppy-conked locals with sugar-free pancakes at 11.40am and 4.30pm feedings. A third feeding at 2.30pm often occurs during a ranger-led hike deeper in the sanctuary. An estimated 300 wild monkeys live in the 6-sq-km reserve. Animals in the reserve generally steer clear of human contact, except for those mischievous macaques, who just love snacks and sunhats. This is clearly more of a commercial affair than the feedings at the SORC; the proboscis monkeys are enticed onto the main viewing platform so tourists can get better pictures, which may put you off if you're looking for a more ecologically minded experience.

The sanctuary offers package trips. A half-day visit costs RM160, including transfers from Sandakan (RM150 from Sepilok). Overnight trips with meals and a night walk start at RM250. Food and accommodation are provided at the **Nipah Lodge**, on the edge of the oil-palm plantations that surround the sanctuary; the lodge is quite comfortable, a collection of chalets that are simply adorned, airy and inviting in a tropical-chic way. Guests can also venture out on mangrove treks into the surrounding jungle, night treks with guides, and are often invited to give basic English lessons at a nearby village schoolhouse.

Independent travel here is difficult unless you have your own vehicle, as Teluk Labuk (Labuk Bay) sits 15km down a rough dirt track off the main highway. If you're staying here, Nipah Lodge will handle all transfers; otherwise your lodging in Sepilok will be able to arrange transport for around RM120. You can also look for minivans and taxis in the car park of SORC; travellers who want to go to Teluk Labuk should be able to negotiate shared taxis and vans to the proboscis feeding for around RM150 (round-trip from Teluk Labuk back to your Sepilok lodging).

Sleeping & Eating

If you came to Sandakan for the orang-utans of Sepilok, do yourself a favour and stay near the apes. The lodging here tends to have more character than Sandakan spots. Most accommodation options are scattered along Jln Sepilok, the 2.5km-long access road to the rehabilitation centre.

TOP CHOICE Paganakan Dii BOUTIQUE HOTEL **$$**
(☎089-532005; www.paganakandii.com; dm/chalet RM30/150; ❄) There are some places that reinvent what budget-to-midrange accommodation is capable of, and Paganakan Dii falls firmly into this vaunted category of hotel. This welcoming and quiet retreat sits deep within a deer preserve, just past a public park. Chic design details made from recycled materials, crisp white linens, smooth wooden chalets, views into a jungle seemingly sliced out of Eden and friendly staff will have you thinking the owners surely left a zero off the price tag. Overall, staying here is a great reason to get stuck in Sepilok. Transfers to the Sepilok Rehabilitation Centre are included in the price. The ridge chalets are some of the best value for money chalets in Sabah, especially seeing as they can be split between three to four people. Book early.

Sepilok Forest Edge Resort RESORT **$$**
(Map p344; ☎089-533190, 089-533245; www.sepilokforestedge.com; Jln Rambutan, Sepilok Mile 14; dm/d/chalets from RM40/80/220; ❄🏊) This fine resort grew out of the excellent Labuk B&B, which is still technically part of the Forest Edge property. Serviceable dorm and double rooms are located in a pretty longhouse, but it's the chalets that are the property's pièce de résistance. The comfortable cabins are peppered across an obsessively maintained acreage (think golf course). There's a relaxing tropical pool/jacuzzi on the grounds as well, which is reserved for chalet guests (or backpackers willing to drop an extra RM8).

Sepilok Nature Resort RESORT **$$$**
(Map p344; ☎089-674999, 089-673999; http://sepilok.com; r from RM280; ❄@) This is as luxurious as Sepilok gets – the full five-star tropical treatment. Run by the very exclusive Pulau Sipadan Resort & Tours, these rattan-accented chalets are exquisitely decked out and have private verandahs overlooking scrumptious gardens and a shaded lagoon. The on-site restaurant cooks the best Western food in Sepilok (not that there's a lot of competition).

Sepilok B&B B&B **$**
(Map p344; ☎089-532288, 019-833 0901; www.sepilokbednbreakfast.com; Jln Arboretum; dm/r RM45/60) This unpretentious option has a palpable summer-camp vibe. That goes for the large crowds who stay here and the

decor of the place, which runs towards stark, simple yet cosy. Crooked picnic tables and varnished lounge chairs offer backpackers plenty of room to chill out after a sweaty day of orang-utanning under the equatorial sun. Located opposite the Rainforest Discovery Centre (RDC).

Uncle Tan GUESTHOUSE $
(☎016-824 4749, 089-535784; www.uncletan.com; dm/tw incl all meals RM48/100, plus RM50 per extra sharing; ❄@) The Uncle Tan empire is one of the oldest backpacker/adventure travel outfits in Sabah. Now they've set up shop in the heart of Sepilok with a couple of decent thatch-roofed gazebos and a stack of backpacker shacks.

Sepilok Jungle Resort RESORT $$
(Map p344; ☎089-533031; www.sepilokjungleresort.com; dm RM28, r RM105-220; ❄@🏊) Everyone seems to stay here but it's hard to see why. Well, no, it's not – this is a big stop on the package-tour path. Some rooms are a bit drab: cheap carpeting and bedspreads and musty windows. Renovated rooms are a better deal – the sort of clean, if institutional hotel room you'd expect at home (but in a jungle).

Most accommodation in the area serves breakfast, and some offer guests three-meal packages. The **SORC cafeteria** (meals from RM5; ⏲7am-4pm) vends sandwiches, noodle bowls, rice plates, snacks and beverages, though they are known for running out of items during the tourist rush. **Mah Fung Enterprise** (⏲Mon-Sat), across from the turn-off to the RDC, sells cold drinks, snacks, sunscreen and insect repellent. There's also a small hut with a blue fence at Batu 14 serving snacks and cold drinks.

Information

Sepilok is located at 'Batu 14' – 14 miles (23km) from Sandakan. The street connecting the highway to the centre is lined with various accommodation (except Paganakan Dii, which is located on the other side of the road).

It's best to get **money** in Sandakan, but an ATM had been installed in a Petronas station on the road between Sandakan and Sepilok. The next-closest **ATM** is in Sandakan Airport. Money can be changed at upmarket sleeping spots for a hefty change fee.

Getting There & Away

Bus

Bus 14 from Sandakan (RM3) departs hourly from the city centre. If coming from KK, board a Sandakan-bound bus and ask the driver to let you off at 'Batu 14'. You will pay the full fare, even though Sandakan is 23km away.

Taxi

If you are coming directly from Sandakan, a taxi should cost no more than RM45 (either from the airport or the city centre). Taxi 'pirates', as they're known, wait at Batu 14 to give tourists a ride into Sepilok. It's RM3 per person for a lift. Travellers spending the night can arrange a lift with their accommodation if they book ahead of time. Walking to the SORC is also an option – it's only 2.5km down the road.

Minivan

You can usually organise a pick-up (in a shared minivan from the Kinabatangan operators) from Sepilok after the morning feeding if you are planning to head to Sungai Kinabatangan in the afternoon.

Sandakan Archipelago

While everyone knows about the Semporna Archipelago, it seems hardly anyone wants to visit the Sandakan Archipelago, off the coast of its namesake port. What gives? Don't like fluffy specks of emerald sprouting like orchids out of the Sulu Sea, or seabound rock walls, or tales of POW derring-do?

Although it's highly promoted by Sabah Tourism, we cannot recommend Turtle Islands National Park at this time. The trip to watch green sea turtles lay eggs is, at best, ill-managed, and at worst a circus. On any one night dozens of gawping tourists cluster round a single laying turtle; this seems to have the effect of scaring some of the reptiles off. Allowing visitors to handle baby turtles before releasing them is highly dubious. The illegal turtle egg trade is certainly alive in Sandakan: we have personally seen turtle eggs for sale within the city's markets, and while this activity is technically illegal, vendors weren't shy about approaching us. That's the sort of adventure on offer in the Sandakan Archipelago.

PULAU LANKAYAN

Pulau Lankayan isn't just photogenic; it's your desktop screen saver. Water isn't supposed to get this clear, nor sand this squeaky clean. A spattering of jungle, a few swaying palms…sigh. No wonder so many lovers come here for their honeymoons, which are often (but not necessarily) accompanied by dive expeditions at **Lankayan Island Resort** (☎088-238113, 089-673999; lankayan-island.com;

Batu 6; r RM3350/RM2728), the one accommodation option on Lankayan. There are a couple dozen cabins dotted along the sand where the jungle meets the sea, decked out in flowing light linens and deep tropical hardwood accents. Transfers from Sandakan are included in your accommodation.

Sungai Kinabatangan

The Kinabatangan River is Sabah's longest: 560km of water so chocolatey brown it would pose a serious safety risk to Augustus Gloop. It coils like the serpents that swim its length far into the Borneo interior. Riverine forest creeps alongside the water, swarming with wildlife that flee ever-encroaching palm-oil plantations. Lodges are set up all along the banks, while home stay programs pop up with the frequency of local monkeys. Dozens of tin boats putter along the shores offering tourists the opportunity to have a close encounter with a rhinoceros hornbill or perhaps a doe-eyed orang-utan.

Sights

Gomantong Caves CAVES

(☎089-230189; www.sabah.gov.my/jhl; adult/child RM30/15, camera/video RM30/50; ⏲8am-noon & 2-4.30pm) Sarawak's Mulu and Niah caverns may be more famous, but for our ringgit, we think the Gomantong Caves give them a run for their money: a massive crack in a mountain, a cathedral-like grand inner chamber formed of limestone, spot-speckled with tubes of golden sunlight and a veritable small hill of bat shit, cockroaches and scorpions. The Gomantong Caves are disgusting, yes, but they're also magnificent.

The forested area around the caves conceals plenty of wildlife and a few good walks – we spotted a wild orang-utan out here, which local staff said was rare but not unheard of (sadly, that's because increased logging is pushing the primates into protected areas like this). The most accessible of the caves is a 10-minute walk along the main trail near the information centre. Head past the living quarters of the nest collectors to get to the main cave, **Simud Hitam** (Black Cave). Venture into the main chamber and keep walking counter-clockwise on the raised platform, which hovers over a steaming soup of bat crap and a chittering, chitinous army of roaches, centipedes and scorpions. The same lovely mix coats the walkway's handrails, so try not to grip them when you (inevitably) slip on the river o' guano. A 45-minute uphill trek beyond the park office leads to **Simud Putih** (White Cave), containing a greater abundance of prized white swiftlets nests. Both trails are steep and require some sweaty rock climbing.

The majority of visitors to Gomantong come as part of an add-on to their Kinabatangan tour package. It is possible to visit the caves under one's own steam, though, usually by private vehicle. The turn-off is located along the road connecting Sukau to the main highway and is quite well signposted. Minivans plying the route between Sandakan and Sukau (RM17) can drop you off at the junction, but you'll have to walk the additional 5km to the park office.

Bukit Belanda HILL

Bukit Belanda – Dutch Hill – is a 420m hill located behind the village of Bilit. The land is owned by the citizens of Bilit, who, despite pressures from logging companies, have not opened the hill to the timber industry, preferring to maintain it as a haven for wildlife. You can hike to the top in an hour if you're fit, where you'll be rewarded by lovely views of Sungai Kinabatangan and, if you're lucky, glimpses of local wildlife (at the very least, you're sure to hear the shrieks of local primates.) It's best to make this trek early in the morning for purposes of both catching the sunrise and avoiding the heat of the day. There's no official infrastructure when it comes to visiting the hill; just ask someone in your lodge or Bilit itself to guide you to the beginning of the ascent path.

Batu Tulug CAVES

(☎089-565145; http://museum.sabah.gov.my; admission RM15; ⏲9am-5pm, closed Fri) On the road from Sandakan to Lahad Datu you can catch a glimpse of Agop Batu Tulug, a jutting knife of white limestone slicing out of the jungle. This hill, located above the village of Batu Putih, is studded with caves that house the ancestors of both local Chinese and the Orang Sungai (People of the River). Because the Kinabatangan has a habit of frequently flooding, the final resting place of the dead has traditionally been located in cave complexes (a practice that has eroded thanks to Christianity and Islam). Heavy wooden coffins – it must have been an awful effort lugging them up the sheer rocks – are interred in the Batu Tulug caves with spears, knives, gongs, bells and Chinese curios. Some coffins

WORTH A TRIP

PULAU BERHALA

Berhala is supremely serene, an exemplar of a rare genre: a lovely tropical island hardly touched by tourists. Sandstone cliffs rise above the Sulu Sea, hemming in quiet patches of dusty, sandy prettiness. The vibe is so sleepy it's narcoleptic, an atmosphere accentuated by a quiet water village inhabited by fishing families, loads of migrating birds (their presence is heaviest in October and November) and...well, OK. There's not a lot else, except some very big rocks.

But oh what rocks. Rock climbers grade the formations here F5a – F6b, which is jargon for a mix of slow sloping walls and vertical cliff faces. Fieldskills Adventures (p311) in Kota Kinabalu runs 2-day/1-night rock-climbing trips out here for RM500 per person.

Berhala was a leper colony during the colonial period, and the Japanese used the island as a civilian internment centre and POW camp during WWII. Agnes Newton Keith was kept here awhile, as was a group of Australian POWs who managed to escape the island by boat and sail to Tawi-Tawi in the Philippines.

are carved with relatively simple geometric patterns, others in beautiful animal designs. This trove of artefacts makes the hill one of the most important archaeological sites in Sabah. **Sabah Museums** runs the site and has built wooden staircases that snake up the 40m hill. There are two main caves to explore, but if you climb the stairs to the top, you'll be rewarded with a nice view of the surrounding jungle and the Kinabatangan River. An interpretive information centre is also located on the site.

The easiest way to get here is to include the caves in your package tour of the Kinabatangan. If you've got your own vehicle, look for signs indicating the turn-off to Batuh Putih or Muzium Batu Tulug on the Sandakan–Lahad Datu road. The village is south of Sukau Junction, about 1½ hours from Sandakan and 45 minutes from Lahad Datu. GPS coordinates are N5024.935' E117056.548'.

Kinabatangan Orang-utan Conservation Project (KOCP) RESEARCH CENTRE

(☎088-413293; www.hutan.org.my) Inside Sukau village is this conservation camp dedicated to studying and protecting Sabah's most iconic animal ambassador. The project is run in partnership with HUTAN, a French NGO, which also works with villagers to establish environmental-education programs, reforestation initiatives and an elephant-conservation project in the Sukau-Bilit area. This is not a tourist-oriented outfit like the Sepilok sanctuary, and as such is not open to casual visitors, but it may be worth contacting it as staff may be willing to hire out guides should you want to go searching for wild orang-utans.

Activities

Wildlife River Boat Cruises BOAT TOUR

Wildlife is the number-one reason to visit Sabah, and a cruise down the Kinabatangan is often a highlight for visitors to the state. In the late afternoon and early morning, binocular-toting enthusiasts have a chance of spotting nest-building orang-utans, nosy proboscis monkeys, basking monitor lizards and hyper long-tailed macaques. That said, there is such a preponderance of operators out here that boats tend to cluster around the wildlife, which kind of ruins the sense of wild exposure. Also, the reason so many animals are here is depressing: the expansion of palm oil plantations has driven local wildlife to the riverbank. They simply have nowhere else to live.

Mammals can be seen all year, moving around in small groups while travelling through plantations. Colourful birds are a huge draw: all eight varieties of Borneo's hornbills, plus brightly coloured pittas, kingfishers and, if you're lucky, a Storm's stork or the bizarre Oriental darter all nest in the forests hugging the Kinabatangan. Avian wildlife is more numerous and varied during rainier months (usually October to late March), which coincides with northern-hemisphere migrations. Though friendly for birds, the rainy season isn't accommodating for humans. Flooding has been a problem of late and a couple of lodges will sometimes shut their doors when conditions are severe.

The success rate of animal-spotting largely depends on luck and the local knowledge of your guide – don't be afraid to ask hard questions about the specifics of your trip before you sign up. Elephants and other larger

THE BUSINESS OF BIRD NESTS

The Gomantong Caves are Sabah's most famous source of swiftlet nests, used for the most revered, rare, luck-and-'strength'-inducing dish of the traditional Chinese culinary oeuvre: the eponymous birds-nest soup. Wait, you ask, people *want* to eat bird nest? Well, it's not twigs and stones folk want to devour: swiftlets make their nests out of their own dried spit, which is the main ingredient in the soup. When added to soup broth, the swiftlet spit dissolves and becomes gelatinous. Wait, you ask, people *want* to eat bird vomit? Well, yes. Very much so.

There are two types of soupworthy bird nests: black and white. Black are a mix of twigs and spit, while the white nests are purely made from the birds' saliva. The white nests are significantly more valuable and Gomantong's got a relatively large amount of them. A kilogram of white swiftlet spit can bring in over US$4000, making nest-grabbing a popular profession despite the perilous task of shimmying up bamboo poles.

In the last few years visiting has been restricted due to dwindling bird populations (cash-hungry locals were taking the nests before the newborn birds had enough time to mature). Today, the caves operate on a four-month cycle, with closings at the beginning of the term to discourage nest hunters. It's worth asking around before planning your visit – often the caves are empty or off-limits to visitors. The four-month cycles are strictly enforced to encourage a more sustainable practice of harvesting.

animals come and go, as herds often break up to get through the palm plantations.

River tours should always be included in lodge package rates. If you prefer to explore independently, contact local home stay programs, which will be able to hook you up with a boat operator. Or ask about renting a boat in Sukau – everyone in the village is connected to the tourism industry either directly or through family and friends, and someone will be able to find you a captain. Another option: just before the entrance to Sukau village is a yellow sign that says 'Di sini ada boat servis' (Boat service here); different river pilots hang out here throughout the day. Whatever way you choose to find a boat and a guide, expect to pay at least RM100 for a two-hour river cruise on a boat that can hold up to six people (ie you can split the cost with friends).

Some of the villages you see along the river are inhabited by Filipino migrants who are stateless citizens, unrecognised by both Malaysia and the Philippines.

Trekking

Depending on the location of your lodge, some companies offer short treks (one to three hours) through the jungle. Night hikes are some of the best fun to be had on the Kinabatangan – there's something magical about being plunged into the intense, cavernlike darkness of the jungle at night. Headlamps should be carried in your hand, rather than worn on your head – bats tend to be attracted to light sources and may fly into them; they also secrete an enzyme causing localised paralysis (it's temporary but can muck up your typinghshshenfnvnwurj – just kidding. Seriously, it's temporary).

Sleeping & Eating

You'll need to book at river lodges in advance. In Kinabatangan lingo, a 'three-day, two-night' stint usually involves the following: arrive in the afternoon on day one for a cruise at dusk, two boat rides (or a boat-hike combo) on day two, and an early morning departure on day three after breakfast and a sunrise cruise. When booking a trip, ask about pick-up and drop-off prices – this is usually extra.

SUKAU

Sukau means 'tall tree' in the local dialect, and the name is quite fitting. The tiny town sits on the river among the skyscraping branches of a shaded thicket, across from massive stone cliffs that are quite attractive, seemingly lifted from a Chinese silk-scroll painting.

Last Frontier Resort RESORT **$$$**

(☎016-676 5922; www.thelastfrontierresort.com; 3-day, 2-night package RM550; ❄@📶) Getting to the Last Frontier is a good first step towards better cardiac health: the only hilltop lodge in the Kinabatangan region sits high, high up (538 steps!) on a hill overlooking the flood plains. Sadly, a Sherpa is not included

in the rates. What you do get is excellent fusion cuisine in the on-site **Monkey Cup Cafe** (this place is owned by a Belgian-Malaysian couple – anyone want *frites mit/avec nasi lemak*?), gorgeous views of the river, well-crafted, simple chalets and a host of trekking options.

Sukau Rainforest Lodge LODGE **$$$**
(☎088-438300; www.sukau.com; 3-day, 2-night package RM1750; ❄📶) The Rainforest Lodge participates in tree-planting projects aimed at reviving degraded portions of riverine forest, aims to reduce use of plastics and is pioneering the use of quiet electric motors on its river cruises (which utilise boats made of recycled materials). All this is well and good, but the sleeping experience is lovely as well: swish but unpretentious longhouses dotted into the jungle, situated around a lovely common space stuffed with gongs, tiki torches and *bubu* (local fish traps), welcome guests after their riverine adventures. Don't miss the 440m annotated boardwalk in the back that winds through the canopy.

Kinabatangan Riverside Lodge LODGE **$$$**
(☎089-213502; www.sitours.com; 2-day, 1-night package per two people US$315; ❄📶) Come here to fall gently asleep in a series of luxury chalets, adrift in simple white sheets and polished wood floors, all connected by a series of shady raised walkways through the jungle. A looping nature trail is out the back and an adorable dining area abounds with stuffed monkeys, faux foliage and traditional instruments. It's managed by SI Tours, which charges in US$.

Barefoot Sukau Lodge LODGE **$**
(☎089-237525; www.barefootsukau.com; r RM250; 📶) Smiling staff direct you to rooms that are small but covered with thick coats of white paint. Just outside Barefoot's cute waterfront cafe is a series of slate-grey cliffs mottled with jungle, creeper and vines.

Sukau Greenview B&B B&B **$**
(☎013-869 6922, 089-565266; http://sukaugreenviewbnb.zxq.net/; 2-day, 1-night package from RM330) This pleasant option offers rooms with twin-size beds in a small cottage-style lodge. It's basic (the floors are made from particleboard) for the price.

BILIT

Bilit is a teeny-weeny village that is primarily full of friendly locals and home stays. River lodges are located on both the Bilit side of the Kinabatangan River and the opposite bank. There's a jetty from which boats depart to lodges on the other side of the river, and across the street is a small yard where you can park a car if you drove; the family that owns the house charges RM20 a day for the privilege. A small banana orchard acts as a magnet for pygmy elephants, which a) are popular with tourists and b) have a bad habit of trampling and eating local crops.

Nature Lodge Kinabatangan LODGE **$$**
(☎088-230534, 013-863 6263; www.naturelodgekinabatangan.com; 3-day, 2-night package dm/chalet RM380/415) Located just around the river bend from Bilit, this charming jungle retreat is a decent choice for backpacker budgets. The campus of bungalows is divided into two sections: the Civet Wing caters to penny-pinchers with dorm-style huts, while the spiffed-up Agamid Wing offers higher-end twin-bed chalets. Neither sleeping experience will blow you away: mattresses are thin and the rooms get dank after the rains, so don't expect luxury. The activity schedule, on the other hand, is fantastic: the three-day, two-night packages include three boat tours, three guided hikes *and* all meals, which is as good value as you'll find in these parts.

Bilit Rainforest Lodge LODGE **$$$**
(☎088-448409; http://bilitrainforestlodge.com; 2-day, 1-night accommodation only RM420; ❄📶) One of the more luxurious sleeping spots along the Kinabatangan, this snazzy option caters to an international clientele with huge bungalows, modern bathrooms and generous amounts of gushing air-con. Common areas are plucked from luxury travel magazine pictorial spreads, and the outdoor bar is especially lovely for nighttime drinks. Unlike many lodges we mention, Bilit charges based off the activites you chose; the above rate is for rooms only. Adding two boat tours and three meals a day increases the rate by RM310 a day. A huge array of package tours is available; see the website for more details.

Bilit Adventure Lodge LODGE **$$$**
(☎089-271077; www.stwadventure.com; 2-day, 1-night package from RM665, with air-con RM740; ❄) This lodge allows you to adventure in (overpriced) style, or at least sleep as such, in a collection of 24 chalets, some fan-cooled and some with air-con, all decorated in safari style with wooden accents and big fluffy beds.

Myne Resort RESORT **$$$**
(☎089-216093; www.myne.com.my; 2-day, 1-night package from RM1055; ❄📶) The newest upmarket option on the river consists of over a dozen dark-toned chalets wedged into a dual ridgeline that overlooks a sweeping bend of the Kinabatangan. With fresh smooth sheets, comfy air-con and an enormous deck area for snacking and drinking, this is a solid upper-tier choice that tends to be popular with tour groups from Europe and China.

Kinabatangan Jungle Camp LODGE **$$**
(☎013-540 5333, 019-843 5017, 089-533190; www.kinabatangan-jungle-camp.com; 2-day, 1-night package RM550) This earth-friendly retreat caters to a niche market of birders and serious nature junkies; facilities are functional, with the focus emphasising quality wildlife-spotting over soft, comfortable digs. Packages include three meals, two boat rides, guiding and transfers. The owners also run the Labuk B&B in Sepilok, and four out of five travellers opt for a Kinabatangan-Sepilok combo tour.

DON'T MISS

HOME STAYS ON THE KINABATANGAN

Home stay programs are popping up with increasing frequency in Sukau, Bilit and other villages, giving tourists a chance to stay with local Orang Sungai – 'people of the river' – and inject money almost directly into local economies. Please note the contacts we provide are for local home stay program coordinators who will place you with individual families.

Our favourite home stay in the region is in the village of Abai. The villagers love hosting guests and, to the degree they can, chatting with you and generally forming cross-cultural bonds (the levels of English are admittedly not great). Expect to be asked to participate in the local village volleyball matches! This home stay is best arranged through Adventure Alternative Borneo (p311) in Kota Kinabalu, which maintains direct contact with the villagers.

In Sukau, **Bali Kito Homestay** (☎089-568472, 013-869 9026; http://sukauhomestay.com; 3-day, 2-night package for four RM650, one night with two meals RM50) can connect you with several different families and, for additional fees, hook you up with cultural programs, fishing trips, opportunities to work on traditional farms, treks, wildlife cruises and other fun. A special walk-in rate of RM30 is also available if you just rock up to the village (meals are RM10 each). A four-person three-day, two-night package that includes meals, four river cruises, transport to and from Sandakan and a visit to the Gomantong Caves runs to RM650 per person, but different packages can be arranged for smaller groups.

In tiny Bilit, we often wondered which houses *weren't* home stays. Contact the exceptionally helpful **Bilit Village Homestay** (☎013-891 3078, 019-537 0843, 019-853 4997; http://bilithomestay.wordpress.com; r from RM55). This outfit offers package deals that are much the same experience as what you would find in Sukau. Three-day, two-night rates, which include river cruises and trekking, run RM360 per person.

Near Batu Pulih (the village adjacent to the Batu Tulug caves), **Mescot/Miso Walai Homestay** (☎012-889 5379, 019-582 5214, 089-551070; www.mescot.org; r RM70) is one of the oldest, best-run community ecotourism initiatives in the area. By dint of its location, this home stay also happens to be outside the tourist crush in Sukau and Bilit, so your chances of spotting wildlife are a bit better.

When staying in a home stay, it is important to act as a guest in someone's home as opposed to a tourist on holiday. Privacy will be reduced, and you may be expected to help with chores, cooking, cleaning etc (this depends on the family you stay with). Men and women should dress modestly and couples will want to avoid overt displays of affection, which locals tend to frown on. English may not be widely spoken, especially at newer home stays, although you'll be impressed at the multilingual abilities of kids who have grown accustomed to meeting travellers from around the world! The experience is a different one, one which many visitors absolutely love, but it's certainly not everyone's cup of tea. That said, we strongly encourage giving home stays a shot if you haven't done so before.

Proboscis Lodge Bukit Melapi LODGE $$
(☎088-240584; http://www.sdclodges.com; 2-day, 1-night package tw share per person RM330; ❄) The Proboscis is a study in subdued, simple luxury. The management has created a sociable ambience with its large bar area and comfy tree-stump seating. Wooden bungalows, strewn along a shrubby hill, have oxidised copper-top roofs that clink when it rains. The two-day, one-night packages include three meals, one river cruise and a pick-up from the Lapit jetty.

UPRIVER

Abai Jungle Lodge LODGE $$$
(☎089-213502, 013-883 5841; www.sitoursborneo.com; 2-day, 1-night packages from US$290) Managed by SI Tours (p340) (the same company that runs Kinabatangan Riverside Lodge), Abai Jungle Lodge sits 37km upstream from Sukau just as the river emerges from the secondary forest. This is a great option for the adventurous – isolated and ecologically minded, Abai also manages to feel quite comfortably luxurious. The woodsy exterior pavilions are good for strolling after crashing in your cosy private room. Eco-conscious attempts are being made to increase sustainability: rainwater is collected in cisterns above the chalets, which run on low-emitting diesel engine generators.

Uncle Tan's Jungle Camp LODGE $$
(☎016-824 4749, 089-535784; www.uncletan.com; 2-day, 1-night packages from RM320, 3-day, 2-night packages from RM420) Uncle Tan was one of the earliest guides and environmentalists working along the Kinabatangan. Although he died in 2002, his legacy lives on in the form of this lodge, a descendant of his original backpacker mecca. This camp isn't for everyone; some travellers may be put out by the spartan conditions, which are basic (running water is the concession to luxury). Others may embrace the roughing-it attitude, especially as the drop in creature comforts is offset by experienced staff members who are skilled at finding wildlife.

Getting There & Away

Transfers are usually arranged with your lodging as part of your package, but you can save by arriving independently. Arrange transport from any of the drop-off points with your tour operator or with a local minivan. Don't get on Birantihanti buses – they stop anytime someone wants to get on or off, which could quadruple travelling time.

Bus & Minivan

From KK, board a Tawau- or Lahad Datu–bound bus and ask the driver to let you off at 'Sukau Junction', also known as 'Meeting Point' – the turn-off road to reach Sukau. If you are on a Sandakan-bound bus, make sure your driver remembers to stop at the Tawau-Sandakan junction – it's called 'Batu 32' or 'Checkpoint' (sometimes it's known as Sandakan Mile 32).

From Sepilok or Sandakan, expect to pay around RM20 to reach 'Batu 32', and around RM30 if you're on a Sandakan–Tawau bus and want to alight at 'Meeting Point'.

A minivan ride to 'Meeting Point' from Lahad Datu costs RM20. When buying your bus tickets remember to tell the vendor where you want to get off so you don't get overcharged.

Car

If you are driving, note that the Shell petrol station on the highway at Sukau Junction (at the turn-off to Sukau) is the last place to fill up before arriving at the river. The road to Sukau is pretty smooth, but as you get closer to Bilit you'll start running into some dirt patches. It is possible to get to Bilit via 2WD – just drive carefully, especially if it's been raining.

Lahad Datu

POP 220,000

Lahad Datu is where a lot of Eastern Sabah is heading: a company town where the company is palm oil plantations.

The locals are lovely and as proud of their home as folks are anywhere else in the world, but there's no real reason to stop here except to arrange a visit to the Danum Valley or Tabin Wildlife Reserve. **Borneo Nature Tours** (☎089-880207; www.borneonaturetours.com; Lot 20, Block 3, Fajar Centre), which runs the Borneo Rainforest Lodge (BRL), and the **Danum Valley Field Centre** (☎088-326300, 089-881092; rmilzah@gmail.com; Block 3, Fajar Centre) have offices next to each other in the upper part of town – known as Taman Fajr, or Fajar Centre. There is a difference between the two Danum options (and yes, these are your only two options). Most people are here to book a stay in the Danum Valley Field Centre, as those who can afford to stay with Borneo Nature Tours aren't likely to book at the last minute and will probably arrange lodging earlier (either in KK or overseas). Because the Field Centre is exactly that – a research centre that doesn't cater to tourists – its office can be slow about responding to emails or phone calls asking for lodging. Sometimes it is best to show up

in person and politely request to speak with someone about sleeping arrangements. Otherwise, contact Rose John Kidi at rmilzah@gmail.com, or ☎088-326300, or else contact Patricia Mobilik or Mahdah Aripin (☎089-881688, 089-0881092; danum@care2.com).

Around the block, you'll find the booking office of Tabin Wildlife Holidays (p356), a secondary forest sanctuary on the other side of Lahad Datu. As this office is a tourism outfit, it is much better about responding to emails; nonetheless, you'll likely pass through Lahad Datu on your way to Tabin.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel De Leon HOTEL $$

(☎089-881222; www.hoteldeleon.com.my; Darvel Bay Commercial Centre; s/d from RM168/178; ❄📶) A good midrange option with business-class standard, fresh, air-conditioned rooms. Perfect for those needing a night of comfort after the bush. Wi-fi is only available in common areas.

Full Wah HOTEL $

(☎089-884100; Jln Anggerik; s/d from RM40/60; ❄) If you're on a tight budget, we recommend Full Wah. While located in a *very* dowdy building, the interior rooms are exceedingly mediocre, in a good way – clean, characterless carpets and bedding. This is as opposed to mildew ceilings and mouldy bathrooms, which seem the unfortunate norm in Lahad Datu's cheaper accommodation.

MultiBake BAKERY $

(cakes from RM1.80; ⏲8am-10pm; 📶) Malaysia's franchised patisserie is located in Fajar Centre (it has free wi-fi too).

Dovist RESTAURANT $

(mains from RM5; ⏲lunch & dinner) Around the corner from the Danum booking offices; a respectable spot for a more substantial meal. It's worth stopping by one of the convenience stores in Fajar Centre to stock up on a couple of snacks before your trip into the Danum Valley.

Getting There & Away

Air

MASwings (☎1800-883000, outside Malaysia 03-7843 3000) currently operates four daily flights to Lahad Datu from KK. The airport is in the upper part of town near Fajar Centre. You must take the first flight of the day (departing KK at 6:25am) if you don't want a one-day layover in town before heading to the Danum Valley.

Bus

Express buses on the KK–Tawau route stop at the Shell station (Taman Fajr) near the Danum Valley office in the upper part of town. Other buses and minivans leave from a vacant lot near Tabin Lodge in the lower part of town. There are frequent departures for Sandakan (RM35, 2½ hours), Sukau (RM23, two hours), Semporna (RM25 to RM30, two hours) and Tawau (RM25 to RM35, 2½ hours). Charter vehicles and 4WDs wait in an adjacent lot; these guys are difficult to hire after sunset.

Danum Valley Conservation Area

Flowing like a series of dark, mossy ripples over some 440 sq km of central Sabah, the Danum Valley is a humid, cackling, cawing mass of lowland dipterocarp arboreal amazement. The forest here is thick – so thick that it has never been (to the best knowledge of anyone living) settled permanently. By humans, that is. Oh, there's life here of another sort in abundance: orangutans, tarsiers, sambar deer, bearded pigs, flying squirrels, proboscis monkeys, gibbons and the pygmy elephant (to name a few), watered by Sungai Segama and shaded by 70m-high old-growth canopy and 1093m-high Mt Danum.

This pristine rainforest is currently under the protection of **Yayasan Sabah** (Sabah Foundation; www.ysnet.org.my), a semigovernmental organisation tasked with both protecting and utilising the forest resources of Sabah. They say that at any given time, there are over a hundred scientists doing research in the Danum Valley. Tourists are less frequent visitors, but they are here, and you should count yourself lucky if you join their ranks. That said, to come here you either need a lot of cash or persistence, as the only two places to stay are a very luxurious resort or a budget-priced research centre where the main priority is accommodating scientists as opposed to, well, you. See the website of the **South East Asia Rainforest Research** (www.searrp.org) for more information on research occurring in the valley.

Sights & Activities

Both the Borneo Rainforest Lodge (BRL) and the Danum Valley Field Centre offer a variety of jungle-related activities. Only the BRL has official nature guides, whereas the Field Centre offers park rangers.

Trekking

The main activities at the BRL and the Danum Valley Field Centre are walking on more than 50km of marked, meandering trails.

At the BRL, take advantage of the well-trained guides who can point out things you would have never seen on your own. The **Coffincliff Trail** is a good way to start your exploration and get your bearings. It climbs 3km to a cliff where the remains of some Kadazan–Dusun coffins can be seen (although the provenance of the coffins is unclear). After reaching an eye-popping panoramic viewpoint 100m up the way, you can either return the way you've come or detour around the back of the peak to descend via scenic **Fairy Falls** and **Serpent Falls**, a pair of 15m falls that are good for a quick dip.

The **Danum Trail**, **Elephant Trail** and **Segama Trails** all follow various sections of Danum Valley and are mostly flat trails offering good chances for wildlife spotting. All can be done in an hour or two. The **Hornbill Trail** and **East Trail** have a few hills, but are still relatively easy, with similarly good chances for wildlife sightings. Finally, if you just need a quick breath of fresh air after a meal, the **Nature Trail** is a short plankwalk near the lodge that allows you to walk into the forest unmolested by leeches.

There are heaps of fantastic trails weaving around the Field Centre – you must bring a ranger along if you aren't a scientist (note that a guide is better than a ranger though, as rangers are not trained to work with tourists). About a two-hour hike away are the **Tembaling Falls**, a cool slice of tropical Edenic beauty. A more strenuous, four-hour trek gets you to the immensely rewarding **Sungai Purut** falls, a series of seven-tiered pools that are fed by waters that drop down 20m from the nearby mountains.

Birdwatching

Danum Valley is very popular with birdwatchers from around the world, who come here to see a whole variety of Southeast Asian rainforest species, including the great argus pheasant, the crested fireback pheasant, the blue-headed pitta, the Bornean bristlehead and several species of hornbill, among many others. If you're serious about birding, it may be best to stay at the Borneo Rainforest Lodge. The canopy walkway here is ideal for birdwatching, and some of the guides are particularly knowledgeable about birds; attempts are made to match birders up with these pros. The access road to BRL is also a good spot for birding, as is, frankly, your porch.

Canopy Walkway

As you'll probably know, most of the action in a tropical rainforest happens up in the forest canopy, which can be frustrating for earthbound humans. The BRL's 107m-long, 27m-high canopy walkway gives mere mortals a means of transcending the surly bonds of earth. The swinging bridges traverse a nice section of forest, with several fine *mengaris* and *majau* trees on either side. Birdwatchers often come here at dawn in hopes of checking a few species off their master list. Even if you're not a keen birder, it's worth rolling out of bed early to see the sun come up over the forest from the canopy walkway – when there's a bit of mist around, the effect is quite magical. It's located on the access road, a 10-minute walk from the lodge. You need to be a guest at the BRL to access the walkway.

Night Drives

This is one of the surest ways to see some of the valley's 'night shift', but driving in the forest hardly gets a gold star for eco-friendliness; sensitive souls might empathise with that 'caught-in-the-headlights' feeling. Expect to see one or two species of giant flying squirrels, sambar deer, civets, porcupines and possibly even leopard cats; lucky sightings could include elephants, slow loris and clouded leopards (if you spot those, boy are you ever lucky).

Night drives leave the BRL most evenings; the best trips are the extended night drives, which depart at about 8.30pm and return at 1am or 2am. Things you'll be glad you brought: light waterproof jacket, camera with flash, binoculars and a powerful torch. Drives can be arranged at the Field Centre as well, although you'll probably have to arrange the vehicle one day in advance.

Sleeping & Eating

There are two lodging options in the Danum Valley, and you absolutely must have accommodation arranged with one of them before you visit – no dropping in. If price is paramount go for the Field Centre. Wildlife fanatics who value professionally trained guides should pick the BRL. The people at Sabah Tourism will try to point you towards the BRL and are reluctant to recommend the Field Centre. Bear in mind: Danum is a

jungle, and you may spend your entire time without spotting wildlife, which is one of the main complaints readers have sent us after staying in the following spots.

Borneo Rainforest Lodge RESORT **$$$**
(BRL; ☎088-267637, 089-880207; www.borneonaturetours.com; d standard/deluxe 3-day, 2-night package RM2390/2690 per person) Borneo Rainforest Lodge is a class act deep within the buzzing haze of Sabah's remaining old-growth forest. Want the experience of staying in an uber-luxurious chalet while keeping an eye peeled for an adorable tarsier? You're in luck. Go for the deluxe if you can; they have private jacuzzis on the wooden verandahs that overlook the quiet ravine – romantic as hell. Honeymooners should go for Kempas D11 – this room has a secluded jacuzzi in its own wooden pagoda. Meals are taken on a beautiful terrace also fronting the river. We were pretty impressed with the assortment of dishes at the buffet – especially since it all had to be lugged in by 4WD. The BRL's only downfall is its marketing strategy. Yes, the lodge is lovely and the outdoor jacuzzis in the superior rooms are undoubtedly lavish, but this isn't a five-star resort. And how could it be, surrounded by relentlessly encroaching jungle? We're impressed, though, that this much luxury exists so deep in the rainforest. Guests who temper their expectations will adore the ambience and find plenty of creature comforts at their fingertips (no air-con though). It's best to book online or in KK.

Danum Valley Field Centre LODGE **$$**
(DVFC; ☎088-326300, 088-881688; rmilzah@gmail.com; resthouse r & board from RM180, camping RM30; ❄) An outpost for scientists and researchers, the field centre also welcomes tourists. Accommodation at the centre is organised into four categories: hostel, resthouse, VIP and camping. We recommend the resthouse rooms, which are located at arm's length from the canteen (the only place to eat). These rooms are basic but clean, sporting ceiling fans and twin beds. Towels are provided for the cold-water showers. The simple hostel is about a seven-minute walk from the canteen, and the barracks-style rooms are separated by gender. If you want to camp, you can lay your sleeping kit (no tent needed) out on the walkways – bug spray recommended! All buildings at the field centre run on generated power, which shuts off between midnight and 7am. There are no professionally trained guides at the centre – only rangers who can show you the trails. You might luck out and find a friendly researcher who will point you in the direction of a few cool things, but some of the scientists (especially the birders) value their privacy (and can you blame them?). There is a kitchen on the campus, however it is reserved for the research assistants. Tourists take their meals in the cafeteria-style canteen (veggie-friendly).

Getting There & Away

Bus & Car

The Danum Valley is only accessible by authorised private vehicle. Borneo Rainforest Lodge guests depart from the lodge office in Lahad Datu at 9am, arriving by lunchtime. If you do not want to spend the night in Lahad Datu, it is recommended you take the 6:25am MASwings flight from KK. If you've prebooked, the driver will wait should your flight be delayed.

Tourists staying at the Danum Valley Field Centre must board one of two jungle-bound vans that leave the booking office in Lahad Datu at 3.30pm on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Transport is RM100 per person each way (this may increase by the time you read this). Vans return to Lahad Datu from the Field Centre at 8.30am on the same days.

Tabin Wildlife Reserve

Tabin's patch of jungle is essentially the downmarket alternative to the Danum Valley. The 1205-sq-km reserve consists mainly of lowland dipterocarp forest with mangrove areas – most of it is technically secondary forest, but that doesn't seem to trouble the wildlife or visitors. The stars here are the elephants and primates – gibbons, red-leaf monkeys and macaques, plus a lot of orangutans. Rescued orangs from Sepilok are actually released here, so you've got a pretty good chance of spotting some hairy red primates in the wild. Birdlife is abundant, and there's a herd of the endangered Sumatran rhino, though you're unlikely to see them.

The park is managed by **Tabin Wildlife Holidays** (☎088-267266; www.tabinwildlife.com.my; Lot 11-1, Block A, Damai Point; 2-day, 1-night package from RM1150), which runs the on-site **Tabin Wildlife Resort**, a pretty retreat with a clutch of upscale chalets. Fair warning: the chalets are attractive, but they're overpriced for what you get. Five trails snake out into the jungle from in front of the resort. Try the Elephant Trail (800m) if you're interested

in belching mud pits. **The Gibbon Trail** (2.8km) leads to the pretty **Lipa Waterfall**.

Tabin can be accessed with a rental vehicle (4WD is a must), but most folks arrange transport with Tabin Wildlife. There are several entrances to the reserve; the easiest one to navigate to is near the junction of Ladan Tungju and Ladang Premai (it's 15km from Lahad Datu Airport to Ladang Kajai).

Semporna

POP 142,000

Most travellers, upon reaching Semporna, turn into little kids on a long car trip: 'But how much *longer* till we get there', with 'there' being Sipadan. Semporna-the-town is the mainland stopping point before Semporna-the-archipelago and all your diving/snorkelling fantasies. Unless you're lucky enough to get here early in the morning, there's a good chance you'll be sticking around overnight. Semporna's fine for an evening of carousing at a bar before donning your fins or checking out the *pasar ikan* (fish markets) and water villages; past that, enjoy your sleep. Not much longer, kids.

Sights & Activities

'Diving' or (rarer) 'snorkelling' is the answer every tourist gives when someone asks them why they're in Semporna. Scuba is the town's lifeline, and there's no shortage of places to sign up for it. Operators are clustered around the 'Semporna Seafront', while other companies have offices in KK. Due to the high volume of interest, it is best to do your homework and book ahead – diving at Sipadan is limited to 120 persons per day.

Sleeping

If you have to overnight in Semporna, your options are limited – but not dire. If you've already signed up with a scuba operator ask them about sleeping discounts (and don't be shy about trying to finagle a good deal, especially if you're sticking around for a while).

Sipadan Inn HOTEL $

(Map p358; ☎089-781766; www.sipadaninn-hotel.com; Block D, Lot No. 19-24, Semporna Seafront; s/d from RM84/95) If you're on a budget, this is one of the better spots in Semporna. The bright white rooms are military clean, without a speck of dust, and it's a stone's throw from most of the dive centres.

Seafest Hotel HOTEL $$

(Map p358; ☎089-782333; www.seafesthotel.com; Jln Kastam; r RM90-260; ❄) The jauntily dubbed Seafest is six storeys of bay-view, business-class comfort at the far end of the 'Semporna Seafront' neighbourhood. It's affiliated with Seafest fishery, so check the restaurant's catch of the day. Don't be shy about asking for discounts, and note suites aren't really worth the extra ringgit.

Dragon Inn HOTEL $

(Rumah Rehat Naga; Map p358; ☎089-781099; www.dragoninnfloating.com.my; 1 Jln Kastam; dm RM20, r incl breakfast from RM80; ❄@) The owners of Dragon figured 'Tourists want stilt houses built over the water and tiki tropical decor' and ran with that theme for several miles. It's a bit tacky, but in an endearing way, and the more upmarket rooms are actually attractive, with dark flooring and island chic decour. The water the Inn stands over is green slop, but the staff is so friendly and eager to please, we forgive this minor trespass.

Scuba Junkie Dive Lodge HOSTEL $

(Map p358; ☎089-785372; www.scuba-junkie.com; Lot 36, Block B, Semporna Seafront; dm/r RM50/120; ❄@) A sociable, clean and basic spot offering 50% discounts for divers who book through Scuba Junkie. There's an adjacent bar (open from 4pm till the last guest passes out) that gets kicking with the dive instructor set come night.

Borneo Global Sipadan BackPackers HOSTEL $

(Map p358; ☎089-785088; www.borneotourstravel.com; Jln Causeway; dm/tr/f incl breakfast RM20/70/100; ❄) Near the Seafest (on the seafront – say that three times fast), this dullish spot is cheap and cheerful. There are posters of fish, to remind you of why you came to Semporna, we guess.

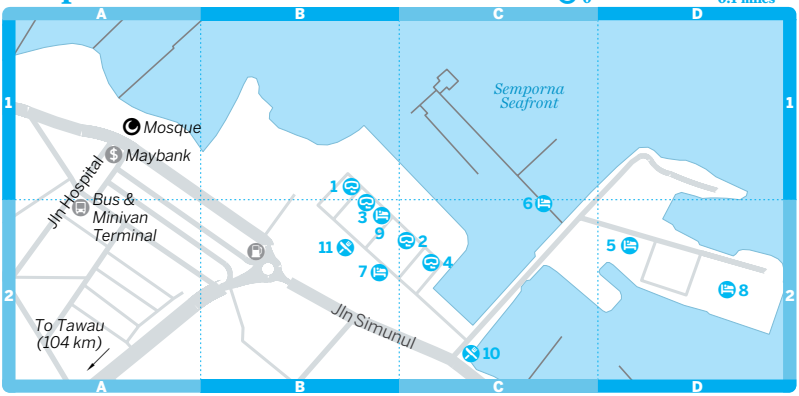
Eating

Various *kedai kopi* line the 'Semporna Seafront', while restaurants at the Seafest Hotel complex offer Chinese seafood. If you wanna go native, sample the *nasi lemak* or *korchung* (rice dumplings) – Semporna is well known for these two dishes.

Anjung Paghalian Café SEAFOOD $

(Map p358; Jln Kastam; mains RM3-5; ⏲5pm-10pm) Beside the Tun Sakaran Marine Park entrance sign, this indoor-outdoor place on a pier features fish, prawn, chicken, squid and venison sold by portions (for two or

Semporna



Semporna

Activities, Courses & Tours

- Big John Scuba ..... (see 6)
- 1 Billabong Scuba B1
- Blue Sea Divers ..... (see 4)
- 2 Scuba Junkie C2
- 3 Sipadan Scuba B2
- Sipadan Water Village ..... (see 3)
- 4 Uncle Chang's C2

Sleeping

- 5 Borneo Global Sipadan BackPackers D2
- 6 Dragon Inn C2
- 7 Scuba Junkie Dive Lodge B2
- 8 Seafest Hotel D2
- 9 Sipadan Inn B2

Eating

- 10 Anjung Paghalian Café C2
- 11 Mabul Steak House B2

more people) and cooked in your choice of up to 12 different styles. It also has standard Malay hawker stalls and even one which serves burgers.

Mabul Steak House STEAKHOUSE **$$**
(Map p358; ☎089-781785; Semporna Seafront; mains from RM11; ⏲noon-11pm) This easygoing balcony restaurant's large and glacial 'ice-blended juices' are a soothing antidote for sucking bottled air. For further chilling, there's a leather couch and overstuffed chairs around a huge TV showing movies or sport. Malaysian standards are done well, and the signature steaks are a surprisingly mouth-watering treat after long days of diving.

Information

If you're arriving in Semporna under your own steam, leave the bus and minivan drop-off area and head towards the mosque's spiking minaret. This is the way to the waterfront. Follow the grid of concrete streets to the right until you reach 'Semporna Seafront' – a collection of buildings decked out in primary colours that starkly contrast with the charmless pastels throughout the rest of town. This neighbourhood is home to the diving outfitters, each stacked one next to the other in a competitive clump. Sleeping and eating options crowd around here, too.

Decompression Chamber (☎089-783100)
The closest **decompression chamber** is at the naval base in Semporna.

Maybank (☎089-784852; Jln Jakarullah)
Expect small lines and the occasional beggar, especially in the evening.

Getting There & Away

Air

Flights to Tawau from KK and KL land at Tawau Airport, roughly 28km from town. A private taxi from Tawau Airport to Semporna costs RM90, while Tawau–Semporna buses (RM15) will stop at the airport if you ask the driver nicely. Buses that do not stop at the airport will let you off at Mile 28, where you will have to walk a few (unshaded) kilometres to the terminal. Remember that flying less than 24 hours after diving can cause serious health issues, even death.

Bus

The 'terminal' hovers around the Milimewa supermarket not too far from the mosque's looming

minaret. All buses run from early morning until 4pm (except Kota Kinabalu) and leave when full.

Kota Kinabalu	(RM65, nine hours) leaves at around 7am or 7pm.
Lahad Datu	(RM25 to RM30, 2½ hours)
Sandakan	(RM35 to RM40, 5½ hours)
Tawau	(RM15, 1½ hours)

Semporna Archipelago

Take the word 'blue' and mentally turn it over through all of its possibilities. From the deepest, richest shades to the light robin's egg shade of the sky to kelp-like aqua. This is the rippled waterscape of the Semporna Archipelago, broken up with pebbles of white sand and swaying palms and the rainbow-coloured boats of copper-skinned Sea Gypsies. But no one comes this way for islands, such as it were – rather it is the blue, the ocean and everything beneath it, that appeals, because this is first and foremost a diving destination, one of the best in the world.

Sights & Activities

Maybe the name Semporna doesn't ring a bell – that's because the key word here is 'Sipadan'. Located 36km off Sabah's southeast coast, **Sipadan** (also called 'Pulau Sipadan') is the shining star in the archipelago's constellation of shimmering islands. The elliptical islet sits atop a stunning submerged pinnacle and world famous near-vertical walls. This underwater beacon is a veritable way station for virtually all types of sea life, from fluttering coral to school-bus-sized whale sharks. Sea turtles and reef sharks are a given during any dive, and luckier scubaholics may spot mantas, eagle rays, octopus, scalloped hammerheads and monitor lizards that could double as Godzilla.

Roughly a dozen delineated dive sites orbit the island – the most famous being the aptly named **Barracuda Point**, where streamers of barracuda collide to form impenetrable walls of undulating fish. Reef sharks seem attracted to the strong current here and almost always swing by to say hello. **South Point** sits at exactly the opposite end of the island from Barracuda Point and usually hosts the large pelagics (manta magnet!). The west side of the island features technicolour walls that tumble down to an impossibly deep 2000m – words can't do the sight of this justice. The walls are best appreciated from out in the blue on a clear afternoon. The east coast tends to be slightly less popular, but that's a relative statement – turtles and sharks are still inevitable.

Although Sipadan outshines the neighbouring sites, there are other reefs in the marine park that are well worth exploring. The macro-diving around **Mabul** (or 'Pulau Mabul') is world-famous. In fact, the term 'muck diving' was invented here. The submerged sites around **Kapalai**, **Mataking** and **Sibuan** are also of note.

While it is possible to rock up and chance upon an operator willing to take you to Sipadan the following day, we strongly suggest that you book in advance. There are travellers and operators who say we are being too cautious with this advice, but your holiday is likely limited, and frankly, better safe than sorry. The downside to prebooking, of course, is that you can't visit each dive centre's storefront to suss out which one you like best, but Johnny-come-latelies might be forced to wait a few weeks before something opens up.

SNORKELLING IN SEMPORNA

Many nondivers wonder if they should visit Semporna. We give a qualified 'yes'. The diving here is obviously the main draw, as there are no real beaches to speak of (besides some small patches of sand). But if you like snorkelling, there's some incentive to come out this way. Snorkelling is not the obsessive hobby that diving is – people don't plan their holidays around it the way they do with diving. But if you're travelling in a group or as a couple where some dive and some don't, the Semporna islands are a lot of fun; dive and snorkelling trips are timed so groups leave and come back at similar times, so you won't feel isolated from each other. If you're on your own and only want to snorkel, it's still pretty great, but not as world class as the diving experience, and a bit pricey relative to the rest of Malaysia – snorkel trips cost around RM150, and you also have to factor in the relatively high cost of accommodation here and the price of getting out to the islands. Then again, you still have a good chance of seeing sting rays, sea turtles and all sorts of other macro-marine wildlife while in the midst of a tropical archipelago, so really, who's complaining?

DON'T MISS

REGATTA LEPA

The big annual festival of local Bajau Sea Gypsies is the Regatta Lepa. (A *lepa* is a type of small boat, so the title somewhat redundantly means 'Boat regatta'.) Traditionally, the Bajau only set foot on mainland Borneo once a year; for the rest of the time they live on small islets or their boats. Today the Bajau go to Semporna and other towns more frequently for supplies, but the old cycle of annual return is still celebrated and marked by the regatta *lepa*. For visitors, the highlight of the festival is the *lepa*-decorating contest held between Bajau families. Their already rainbow-coloured boats are further decked out in streamers, flags (known as *tapi*), bunting, ceremonial umbrellas (which symbolise protection from the omnipresent sun and rain that beats down on the ocean) and *sambulayang*, gorgeously decorated sails passed down within Bajau clans. On each boat you can see a smaller, rectangular *lamak kapis* sail and the larger *lamak bua'an* sail, shaped to resemble the maw of a fish. Violin, cymbal and drum music, plus 'sea sports' competitions like duck catching and boat tug-of-war, punctuate the entire affair. It's a hell of a show. The regatta occurs in mid-April; check etawau.com for details, and don't miss the show if you're in town at this time of year.

The government issues 120 passes (RM40) to Sipadan each day (this number includes divers, snorkellers and day trippers). Bizarre rules and red tape, like having certain gender ratios, make the permit process even more frustrating. Each dive company is issued a predetermined number of passes per day depending on the size of its operation and the general demand for permits. Each operator has a unique way of 'awarding' tickets – some companies place their divers in a permit lottery, others promise a day at Sipadan after a day (or two) of diving at Mabul and Kapalai. No matter which operator you choose, you will likely be required to do a non-Sipadan intro dive unless you are a Divemaster who has logged a dive in the last six months. Permits to Sipadan are issued by day (and not by dive) so make sure you are getting at least three dives in your package.

A three-dive day trip costs between RM250 and RM500 (some operators include park fees, others do not – make sure to ask), and equipment rental (full gear) comes to about RM50 or RM60 per day. Cameras (around RM100 per day) and dive computers (around RM80 per day) are also available for rent at most dive centres. Top-end resorts on Mabul and Kapalai offer all-inclusive package holidays (plus a fee for equipment rental).

Although most of the diving in the area is 'fun diving', Open Water certifications are available, and advanced coursework is popular for those wanting to take things to the next level. The only problem with getting your Open Water certification here is that all other dive sites may pale in comparison! Diving at Sipadan is geared towards divers with an Advanced Open Water certificate (currents and thermoclines can be strong), but Open Water divers should not have any problems (they just can't go as deep as advanced divers). A three-day Open Water course will set you back at least RM950. Advanced Open Water courses (two days) cost the same, and Divemaster certification runs for around RM2500.

Several dive operators are based at their respective resorts, while others have shopfronts and offices in Semporna and/or KK. Please note we have listed the following alphabetically, not in order of preference – we simply didn't have the time to go diving with every outfitter in the islands. No matter where your desired operator is located, it is *highly* recommended you contact them in advance. The following dive operators are among the growing list of companies in the area:

Big John Scuba DIVING
(Map p358; www.smiffystravels.com/BJSUBA2.htm) 'Big John' is a local guy who loves Sabah, Semporna and diving. He specialises in macro photography and muck diving and while he is an instructor, he separates his students from his diving groups. Has an office by the Dragon Inn.

Billabong Scuba DIVING
(Map p358; ☎089-781866; www.billabongscuba.com; Lot 28, Block E, Semporna Seafront) Accommodation can be arranged at a rickety 'home stay' on Mabul.

Blue Sea Divers DIVING
(Map p358; ☎781 322; www.blueseadivers-sabah.com; Semporna Seafront) Reputable day-trip operator in Semporna.

Borneo Divers DIVING
(☎088-222226; www.borneodivers.info; 9th fl, Menara Jubili, 53 Jalan Gaya, Kota Kinabalu) The original operators in the area, Borneo Divers unveiled Sipadan to an awestruck Jacques Cousteau. It has maintained its high standards throughout the years, offering knowledgeable guides and comfy quarters. The office is located in Kota Kinabalu. There is a comely resort on Mabul. Recommended.

Scuba Junkie DIVING
(Map p358; ☎089-785372; www.scuba-junkie.com; Lot 36, Block B, Semporna Seafront) Popular with the young backpacker crowd.

Scuba Jeff DIVING
(☎019-5855125, 017-8690218; www.scubajeffsipadan.com) Jeff, a friendly local bloke, runs his adventures out of the local fishing village in Mabul. Good option for the budget crowd.

Seahorse Sipadan DIVING
(☎012-279 7657, 016-835 5388, 089-782289; www.seahorse-sipadanscuba.com) Backpacker-oriented outfit that runs a hostel on Mabul.

Seaventures DIVING
(☎088-261669; www.seaventuresdive.com; 4th fl, Wisma Sabah) Highly regarded outfit that will put you up in an ocean platform off the coast of Mabul. Offices in KK.

Sipadan Scuba DIVING
(Map p358; ☎089-784788, 089-919128; www.sipadanscuba.com; Lot 23, Block D, Semporna Seafront) Twenty years of Borneo experience and an international staff makes Sipadan Scuba a reliable, recommended choice.

Sipadan Water Village DIVING
(Map p358; ☎089-784227, 010-932 5783, 089-751777, 089-950023; www.swvresort.com; Jln Kastam) A private operator based at the Mabul resort with the same name.

SMART DIVING
(☎088-486389; www.sipadan-mabul.com.my) The dive centre operating at Sipadan-Mabul Resort and Mabul Water Bungalow; both are located on Mabul. Also has offices in KK.

Uncle Chang's DIVING
(Borneo Jungle River Island Tours; Map p358; ☎089-786988, 017-895 0002, 089-781002; www.ucsipadan.com/; 36 Semporna Seafront) Offers diving and snorkelling day trips, plus stays at its lodge on Mabul (RM90 per person).

Sleeping & Eating

From opulent bungalows to ragtag sea shanties, the marine park offers a wide variety of accommodation catering to all budgets. Sleeping spots are sprinkled across the archipelago with the majority of options clustered on Mabul (Sipadan's closest neighbour). No one is allowed to stay on Sipadan. Note that prices rise in August and September. Nondivers are charged at different rates than divers.

At almost all of the places listed below, you are tied to a set schedule of three to five meals broken up by roughly three diving (or snorkelling) trips per day. Meals are included; drinks are always extra, although tea and coffee are often gratis. If you feel the need to let loose at night, there are occasional parties at Uncle Tan's or Scuba Junkie on Mabul. High-end resorts have their own bars and restaurants; you may be able to eat and drink here if you're staying in a budget spot and the man at the gate is in a good mood, but you'll pay for it.

Divers and snorkellers can also opt to stay in the town of Semporna. That means slightly better bang for your buck, but no fiery equatorial sunsets. Perhaps more pertinently, it takes at least 30 minutes, and usually a bit longer, to get to dive sites from Semporna town.

Every one of the accommodation options listed below can arrange diving trips, including certification courses and trips to Sipadan.

SINGAMATA

Not an island at all, but rather a floating village built onto a sandbar about 30 minutes from Semporna, **Singamata** (☎089-784828; www.singamata.com; 3-day, 2-night diving/non-diving RM720/500) is a pretty assemblage of stilt chalets and decks with its own pool full of giant fish (which you can snorkel amid). If you feel like dipping into the water, you can literally just step out of your room (annoyingly, rubbish from Semporna sometimes still floats into the vicinity). Rooms are basic but pretty and breezy. You may feel isolated out here, but if you need an escape, this is a lovely option.

MABUL

Mabul is the main accommodation centre in the islands. This little speck is blessed

with one very small white-sand beach, fantastically blue waters and two small settlements: a camp of Bajau Sea Gypsies and a Malaysian water village of stilt houses built over the seashore, where most of the island's budget accommodation is clustered.

It's worth having a walk around the island, which should take you all of an hour or two. Behind the resorts are generators and barracks-style housing for resort staff. The locals are eager for your business; there's little shops in the villages that sell candy, crisps, cigarettes and other little incidentals. Plus watching the sunset bleed over stilt houses, as the Bajau set cooking fires in their houseboats, is mind-blowingly romantic, and a bit unexpected in a place that's so marketed towards diving.

Mabul Beach Resort RESORT **$$**
(☎089-785372; www.scuba-junkie.com; dm RM95, r RM225-375; ❄📶) Owned and operated by Scuba Junkie, this spot is all the rage with the flashpacker crowd. Chalets with en suite bathrooms, porches and polished wood floors make for some posh digs priced (relatively) within the top of the budget range. Note the room prices are for single occupancy – rooms all have two beds, and are cheaper if rented out by two people.

Mabul Water Bungalow RESORT **$$$**
(☎088-486389; www.mabulwaterbungalows.com; 3-day, 2-night dive package from US$1016, nondivers US$606; ❄📶) Travellers in Asia tend to love crystal-clear water and temples. These two concepts come together with a heaping dash of amazing at Mabul Water Bungalows, a gorgeously executed series of chalets-cum-Balinese shrines built over the Celebes Sea. This is easily the best upmarket option on Mabul. Rooms are effortlessly opulent, and the resort's only suite, the Bougain Villa (ha!), features a trickling waterfall in the bathroom, its own private dock and glass floors revealing the starfish-strewn sea floor.

Borneo Divers Mabul Resort RESORT **$$$**
(☎088-222226; www.borneodivers.net; per person twin/single RM1148/765; ❄@📶) The oldest dive centre in the region offers lodging in a horseshoe of semidetached mahogany bungalows with bright-yellow window frames. Open-air pavilions with gauzy netting punctuate the perfectly manicured grounds. Wi-fi is available in the dining room.

Scuba Jeff LODGE **$**
(☎019-5855125, 017-8690218; www.scubajeffsipadan.com; r RM80; 📶) Jeff is a very friendly dude who maintains this large stilt house in the Malay fishing village. While his place is a little tatty, it reminds us of the fun of backpacking – staying in a flophouse and meeting random folk on a budget (including quite a few backpacking Malays).

Sipadan Adventures HOME STAY **$**
(☎012-822 9984; www.sipadanadventures.com; dm/r per person RM70/90) Clean, remodeled rooms and a focus on budget travel make for a fun diving joint. Staff will help arrange dive trips for you and the owners cook up some mean fish.

Uncle Chang's GUESTHOUSE **$**
(☎089-781002, 017-895 002, 089-786988; www.ucsipadan.com; per person dm/d RM70/90, per person d with air-con & bathroom RM100; ❄) A Sipadan backpacking stalwart catering to the like-named dive operator, Chang's is a fun, sociable spot that periodically throws kicking little parties. The air-con rooms, clocking in at RM90, are good value for money.

Seaventures Dive Resort RESORT **$$$**
(☎088-261669; www.seaventuresdive.com; 4-day, 3-night dive package from RM2160; ❄) This oil rig (no, really) sits just off Mabul's silky shoreline. There are two schools of thought on Seaventures' aesthetic impressions: 'A worthy attempt at giving tourists a unique accommodation option, and 'That thing? Forget it.' Honestly, we're not sure where we fall in this debate, but its diving staff comes very highly recommended.

Billabong GUESTHOUSE **$**
(☎089-781866; www.billabongscuba.com; per person r with fan/air-con RM70/120) Chill with fishermen, watch the sunset over the plankboards and set out for some diving adventures with associated Billabong Scuba at this home stay.

Sipadan-Mabul Resort RESORT **$$$**
(SMART; ☎088-486389; www.sipadan-mabul.com.my; 7-day, 6-night dive package from US$1570, nondivers US$1186; ❄📶🏊) Even though the summer-camp styling suits the tropical landscape, the prices here are out of whack. Long-stays get the hard sell. If you feel like splurging why not go all the way and snag a room at SMART's sister property, Mabul Water Bungalow (p362)? Wi-fi is available in the dining area.

Sipadan Water Village Resort RESORT $$$
(☎089-751777; www.swvresort.com; 4-day, 3-night package from RM4100; ❄@) Outmoded design details (although when were wooden tarantula ornaments ever in style?) quickly set the tone here – this resort-on-stilts doesn't pull off 'graceful elegance' quite like Mabul Water Bungalow next door, despite the idyllic location. If you decide that this is the spot for you, then go for the 'grand deluxe' bungalows.

Seahorse Sipadan GUESTHOUSE $
(☎016-8355388, 089-782289; www.seahorse-sipadanscuba.com; dm/r from RM80/90) Basic digs for budget backpackers.

KAPALAI

Although commonly referred to as an island, Kapalai is more like a large sandbar sitting slightly under the ocean surface. From afar, the one hotel, **Kapalai Resort** (☎088-316011/3; http://sipadan-kapalai.com/; 63 Gaya Street, Kota Kinabalu; 4-day, 3-night package from RM2790; ❄@) looks like it's sitting on palm trunks in the middle of the sea. The resort designers went for a Sea Gypsy theme and tacked on an opulent twist, making the sea cabins out of shiny lacquered wood.

MATAKING

Mataking is also essentially a sandbar, two little patches of green bookending a dusty tadpole tail of white sand. **Mataking Island Resort** (☎089-786045, 089-770022; www.mataking.com; Jln Kastam; 3-day, 2-night package for divers/nondivers from RM2470/2110; ❄@) is the only accommodation here. This is an impeccably luxurious escape full of dark-wood chalets and gossamer sheets. This sandy getaway has some really beautiful diving – an artificial reef and sunken boats provide a haven for plenty of sea life – and has set up a novel 'underwater post office' at a local shipwreck site.

POM POM

Pom Pom needs no cheerleading – this stunning, secluded haven sits deep within the Tun Sakaran Marine Park, about one hour by boat from Semporna. **Sipadan Pom Pom Island Resort** (☎089-781918; pompomisland.com; 3-day, 2-night package RM1600-2000; ❄@) runs the only operation on the island. The poshest rooms are built over the water, while reed-and-thatch bungalows offer sea views from spacious balconies. The cheapest rooms are set back in a 'garden' area, but are still basically a hop from the ocean.

ROACH REEFS

This network of artificial reefs was once the private underwater playground for a wealthy businessman, but today **Roach Reefs Resort** (☎089-779332; www.roachreefsresort.com; 2-day, 1-night package for divers/non-divers per person US$185/148; ❄@) has opened its doors to tourists. You'll stay in simple shacks (a little *too* simple, frankly; we wouldn't mind a little more flash at these prices) plunked in a man-made spit of sand, shaded under coconut trees. Keep in mind boat transfers here come from Tawau, as opposed to Semporna.

Information

The Semporna Islands are loosely divided into two geographical sections: the northern islands (protected as **Tun Sakaran Marine Park**) and the southern islands. Both areas have desirable diving – Sipadan is located in the southern region, as is Mabul and Kapalai. Mataking and Sibuan belong to the northern area. If you are based in Semporna you'll have a greater chance of diving both areas, although most people are happy to stick with Sipadan and its neighbours.

Consider stocking up on supplies (sunscreen, mozzie repellent etc) before making your way into the archipelago. Top-end resorts have small convenience stores with inflated prices. ATMs are nonexistent, but high-end resorts accept credit cards (Visa and MasterCard). Mabul has a small police station near the village mosque, as well as shack shops selling basic foodstuffs and a small pharmacy. Internet is of the wi-fi variety; most resorts now offer it, but service tends to be spotty.

The closest decompression chamber (p358) is at the Semporna Naval Base.

Getting There & Around

Boat

With the exception of Roach Reefs, all transport to the marine park goes through Semporna. Your accommodation will arrange any transport needs from Semporna or Tawau Airport (sometimes included, sometimes for an extra fee - ask!), which will most likely depart in the morning. That means if you arrive in Semporna in the afternoon, you will be required to spend the night in town.

Tawau

POP 380,200

Ever been to an after-work happy hour and met a co-worker who is nice, courteous, polite, pleasant and agonisingly boring? Then you've met Tawau. There's nothing

Tawau

Sights

1 Mosque C2
2 Public Library D3

Sleeping

3 Hotel Soon Yee B2
4 Kingston Executive Hotel D1
5 Monaco Hotel C1
6 Shervinton Executive Hotel C2

Eating

7 Hawker Seafood C3
8 Restoran Azura B2
Restoran Azura ..... (see 9)
9 Sabindo Hawker Centre D2

Shopping

10 Servay Department Store B2

particularly *bad* we can write about this town, but (forgive us the pun) there's not a lot of 'wow' in Tawau either. This may be one of Sabah's larger cities, and it's the state's major border crossing to Indonesia – Kalimantan is just to the south. Apart from that? Not much. But if you're heading to Semporna or the Maliau Basin, there's a good chance you'll be passing through. And hey – the people *are* friendly, the food is decent and the lodging is a pretty good deal. Just don't expect much past this and you'll likely leave satisfied after eating the great scoop of vanilla ice cream that is Tawau.

Tawau is the only crossing point with Kalimantan where foreigners can get a visa to enter Indonesia.

Sights

Bukit Gemok Forest Reserve NATURE RESERVE
(adult/child RM5/1) Located 10km from Tawau town centre, this reserve is a gem, and the best option for those who need to while away a day here. Developed in the early 1990s, the jungle is filled with chattering monkeys, and has become popular with trekkers, Hash House Harriers runners and tour groups – many consider it to be far better than the trails around Poring Hot Springs. The most popular trail is a demanding one-hour (if you're fit!) jaunt up **Lim Man Kui Quarry Hill**, a slate-grey knife of rock. It's a huff to make it to the top, but the stunning views from the top are worth it, as is your casual disbelief at the middle-aged Chinese fitness nuts who *jog* up this track on a regular basis.

Within the reserve, a 231m **canopy walkway** offers lovely views of the surrounding countryside and Tawau itself.

Be on the lookout for the relatively enormous (15cm) seeds of the gourd *Alsomitra macrocarpa*; the seeds are flattened into aerodynamic pancakes and regularly glide hundreds of metres through the forest; they're fairly breathtaking to watch in flight. A taxi to the park costs RM30 – make sure your driver either waits for you or is willing to come back and pick you up, as there's little public transport out this way.

Sleeping

Splurge for a midrange option if you're stopping through. They cater to local businessmen and are excellent value – miles beyond anything you can get in KK. Jalan Bunga and Haji Karim are packed with options. Budget digs tend to be pretty dire.

Shervinton Executive Hotel HOTEL $$
(Map p364; ☎770000; www.shervintonhotel.com; Jln Bunga; r/ste from RM98/200; ❄📶) The Shervinton is the brightest, most well-lit and freshest option in the city centre. An on-site spa, salon and gym facility (there's even a bakery!) make this a surprisingly luxurious option.

Monaco Hotel HOTEL $
(Map p364; ☎769911/2/3; Jln Haji Karim; r from RM80; ❄) It's not the Riviera – there's no oversized sunglasses or suave men in tuxedos playing baccarat in this version of Monaco. Instead: an exterior painted a shade of yellow that may make your eyes bleed, offset by quite lovely interior rooms done up like the Holiday Inn, Malaysia-style.

Kingston Executive Hotel HOTEL $$
(Map p364; ☎702288; 4581-4590 Jln Haji Karim; d RM80-100; ❄@) The title of this hotel may seem ambitious, but this 'executive' is nonetheless quite excellent value-for-money. It's a cheering attempt at emulating boutique quirk, an odd experience in sedate Tawau. Some rooms have duvets made from *kain songket* (traditional Malay handwoven fabric with gold threads).

Hotel Soon Yee HOTEL $
(Map p364; ☎772447; 1362 Jln Stephen Tan; r RM30-35; ❄) Soon Yee is a backpacker standard. There are no phones, no hot water, but there is lots of camaraderie and character. Cheaper fan-cooled rooms have shared bathrooms.

Eating

Locals love splurging on the buffet lunch at the **Belmont Marco Polo** which, for RM18 (RM33 on weekends), is a steal considering the variety of tasty bites. The interior courtyard around the Kingston Hotel has a few local haunts serving up tasty dishes, and there's cheap Chinese *kedai kopi* along Jalan Bunga; most open around 7am and close

TAWAU TREATS

Thanks to Tawau's proximity to Indonesia and large population of Indonesians, Filipinos, Bajau and Hakka Chinese, the town has developed some worthwhile culinary specialities. All of the following can be found in almost any of Tawau's *kedai kopi* (coffee shops) and in the Sabindo Hawker Centre:

Mee Jawa – Javanese-style noodles, the Javanese take on Asia's ubiquitous noodle soup. This version comes with a yellowish broth swimming with bean sprouts, groundnuts, bean curd, fish balls, the occasional prawn and sometimes (interestingly), sweet potato, plus the usual garlic, shallots, chillies and shrimp paste.

Gado gado – A deliciously simple Indonesian speciality: vegetable salad with prawn crackers and peanut sauce. The glory of *gado* is the variations of the standard recipe – every cook and hawker puts a different spin on it.

Nasi Kuning – Rice cooked with coconut milk and turmeric, hence the English translation of the name: 'yellow rice'. In Tawau, it is often wrapped and served in a banana leaf with deep-fried fish and eaten on special occasions.

Soto Makassar – Oh yes! Soto (also spelled 'coto' and pronounced 'cho-to') Makassar is buffalo/beef soup from Southern Sulawesi, Indonesia. The dark broth is made incredibly rich by the addition of buffalo/cow blood, and enriched by a plethora of some 40 spices, plus beef heart, liver, tripe and brain. If you have a weak stomach, ignore those ingredients and trust us: this stuff is *delicious*, like liquid essence of beef spiced with all the wonderful herbs and spices of Southeast Asia.

around 10pm. You may notice severe posters around town with pictures of mutilated fish that say *Bom ikan*. *Bom ikan* means 'bomb(ed) fish,' a reference to fish that have been harvested from dynamited coral reefs. The posters warn of the illegality of possessing or selling 'bombed fish'.

Self-caterers should try the **Servay Department Store** (Map p364; Jln Musantara) across from the Old Central Market, for everything from picnic lunches to DVDs of dubious authenticity.

Sabindo Hawker Centre HAWKER $
(Map p364; Jln Waterfront; dishes from RM5; ⏲11am-10pm) Located along the Tawau waterfront, Sabindo is the place to come for impeccably fresh street stall food, which, as is often the case in Asia, is the tastiest stuff around. Prices run the gamut from cheap-as-chips soup stalls to Chinese seafood emporiums.

Restoran Azura INDIAN $
(Map p364; ☎012-863 9934; Jln Dunlop; dishes RM3-6; ⏲8am-9pm) Recommended for its tasty South Indian food and snicker-worthy menu, Azura serves up a killer fish-head curry and sundry 'tits-bits'. The noodles are pretty good too. There's another branch at the Sabindo Hawker Centre (Map p364).

Information

Internet Access

City Internet Zone (☎760016; 37 Kompleks Fajar, Jln Perbandaran; per hr RM2-3; ⏲9am-midnight)

Banks

HSBC (Jln Perbandaran) ATM.

Maybank (☎762333; Jln Dunlop)

Tourist Information

Maliau Basin Conservation Area Authority (☎759214; maliaubasin@gmail.com; 2nd fl, UMNO Building; Jln Dunlop) Can provide information on and help arrange visits to the Maliau Basin.

Getting There & Away

Air

Malaysia Airlines (☎089-761293; Jln Haji Sahabudin) and **AirAsia** (☎089-761946; Jln Bunga) have daily direct flights to KK and KL. **MASwings** (☎1300-883 000) flies to Sandakan twice daily, the afternoon flight continuing to KK.

Bus & Minivan

Kota Kinabalu Daily express buses for KK (RM65, nine hours) leave from behind the Sabindo area in a large dusty lot at 8am and 8pm (not in between).

Sandakan Departs hourly from Sabindo Sq (RM35 to RM40, five hours, 7am to 2pm), one block on a diagonal from the KK terminus, behind the purple Yassin Curry House sign.

GETTING TO INDONESIA: TAWAU TO TARAKAN

Getting to the border Tawau is the only crossing point with Kalimantan where foreigners can get a visa to enter Indonesia. The local Indonesian consulate is known for being fast and efficient – many travellers are in and out in an hour. The consulate is in Wisma Fuji, on Jln Sinn Onn. You can flag down a taxi (RM10) or take a bus from the central bus station (RM0.80). These buses leave every 30 minutes – as the touts swarm around you, say 'Indonesia consulate' and they'll point you to the right vehicle. Ask the driver to drop you off in front of the consulate; to get back, just stand by the road and flag a bus or minibus down to return to the city centre for a similar fare.

Visa applications are processed between 9:30am to 2pm Monday to Friday. You technically need to either provide proof of onward travel or a credit card, which consulate staff will make a copy of. A 60-day tourist visa will run RM170 and require two passport photos. Bank on spending at least one night in town before shipping off to Indonesia, given the ferry departure schedule, and bring extra cash to the consulate, as there are no ATMs nearby.

Ferry companies Tawindo Express and Indomaya Express make the three- to four-hour trip to Tarakan (RM140; 11.30am Monday, Wednesday and Friday, 10.30am Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday) and the one-hour trip to Nunukan (RM65; 10am and 3pm daily except Sunday). We recommend showing up at least 60 minutes before departure to get a ticket; less than that is cutting it fine. A taxi ride to the ferry terminal costs RM5.

At the border Blue minivans in Tarakan can get you around the city for Rp3000; expect to pay around Rp20,000 to get to the airport.

That's also the spot for frequent minivans to the following:

Semporna (RM15, two hours)

Lahad Datu (RM15, three hours)

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

The airport is 28km from town along the main highway to Semporna and Sandakan. A shuttle bus (RM15) to the local bus station in Tawau's centre leaves six times daily. A taxi costs RM45.

Tawau Hills Park

Hemmed in by agriculture and human habitation, this small reserve has forested hills rising dramatically from the surrounding plain. The **park** (admission RM10) is intended to protect the water catchment for settlements in the area, but not before most of the accessible rainforest had been logged. Much of the remaining forest clings to steep-sided ridges that rise to 1310m Gunung Magdalena.

If getting into the Maliau Basin or Danum Valley feels like too much of an effort, consider Tawau Hills a user-friendly alternative. The forest here may not be as primevally awesome, but it's still impressively thick jungle, and the trails are quite easy on your feet. On a clear day the Tawau Hills Park's peaks make a fine sight.

The first trail leads along the Sungai Tawau (chattering with birds like a Disney movie when we attempted it) for 2.5km to **Bukit Gelas Falls** that, when not swarmed with school groups and tourists, is perfectly picturesque. Another track leads 3.2km to a group of 11 **hot springs** that are frankly as impressive as anything you'll see in Poring; locals believe the *ubat kulit* (skin medication) water has medicinal properties. If the above doesn't appeal, you can always take a quick 30-minute walk to **Bombalai Hill** (530m) to the south – the views from here are also quite rewarding.

There's accommodation at **Tawau Hills Park** (Taman Bukit Tawau; ☎089-918827/768719, 019-800 9607; camping/dm/chalet RM5/20/200). Rates are lower on weekdays. Both dorms and chalets are utilitarian, and there's not much reason to stay here unless you can't stomach a night somewhere else. If you want to camp, you'll need to bring all of your own equipment.

Tawau Hills is 28km northwest of Tawau. A taxi will cost about RM30 to RM40.

Maliau Basin Conservation Area

In the minds of most travellers, and certainly the entire marketing division of Malaysia's tourism board, Sabah is associated with wild adventure. But while there are many wild stretches of Sabah, this state has also been heavily impacted by logging, oil palm and, on a smaller scale, suburban sprawl.

This pocket of truly untouched, Eden-as-God-made-it wilderness remains. Hemmed in by mountains, separated by distance and altitude and expanse, the Maliau Basin Conservation Area (MBCA), known very appropriately as 'Sabah's Lost World', is…well, something special.

The basin is exactly that – a bowl-shaped depression of rainforest that was unnoticed by the world until a pilot almost crashed into the walls that hem it off in 1947. Run by the Sabah Foundation, this is the single best place in Borneo to experience old-growth tropical rainforest. More than that, it is one of the world's great reserves of biodiversity, a dense knot of almost unbelievable genetic richness. A visit to the basin is always a poignant affair, as you'll share the road with a parade of logging trucks hauling trees out of the forest at an astonishing rate.

Unbelievably, there is no known record of human beings entering the basin until the early 1980s (although it is possible that indigenous peoples entered the basin before that time). It is only recently that the area has been opened up to a limited number of adventurous travellers. Getting here requires time and resources, and officially a lot of money, although there may be ways around the latter.

Sights & Activities

Trekking

The trek through the Maliau Basin will likely be the most memorable hike of your Borneo experience. The density of the old-growth forest is striking, and as it is more remote than the Danum Valley, the preserved wildlife is even better. That said: you are in the jungle, and wildlife is not easy to spot. You may walk away without seeing anything but some of Borneo's most ancient trees, which isn't so bad, really.

Several treks are possible in the basin, ranging from short nature walks around **Agathis Camp** to the multiday slog to the rim of the basin via **Strike Ridge Camp**. The

INDEPENDENT EXPEDITIONS TO THE MALIAU BASIN

Private tour operators or employees of Sabah Tourism will tell you it is not possible to visit the Maliau basin without a prior tour arrangement, but we have found this is not necessarily true. With that said, you'll probably need at least RM1000 (and a fair bit of elbow grease) to make the following plan work, so this isn't an entirely budget proposal:

It's best to first contact the **Maliau Basin Conservation Area Authority** (☎089-759214; maliaubasin@gmail.com; 2nd fl, UMNO Building, Jln Dunlop) in Tawau. You may need to show up to the office in person, as this is not a tourism body accustomed to dealing with visitors. You can also try driving to the park entrance from Tawau (2½ hours) or KK (at least five hours); a 2WD Proton can make the trip with cautious driving, while a motorbike would be dodgy but doable.

To get into the park you need to pay an administration fee (RM60), a vehicle entry fee (RM5 per vehicle), and if you stay overnight, a conservation fee (RM50). If you plan to hike (and what else are you going to do?) you *must* hire a guide, which costs RM200 per day. The different camps in the basin cost RM180 to RM205 per person per night for a room; some offer dorm beds for RM70, and you can camp in your own tent for RM30. Meals can be taken in the guesthouses for RM40/50/60 per person for breakfast/lunch/dinner. You can also arrange meals while trekking; this requires a porter and costs RM70/100/130 for breakfast/lunch/dinner.

We have talked with travellers who were able to arrange all of the above at the park entrance without even stopping by the Tawau office. Our sense is this scenario will not be possible if a flood of travellers starts pounding on the basin's gates, so you may still want to check with the Tawau office before coming all the way out here. Ideally, if you're not buying the package tour, we advise prearranging your tour with the office in Tawau.

vast majority of visitors to the basin undertake a three-day, two-night loop through the southern section of the basin that we'll call the Maliau Loop. This brilliant route takes in wide swaths of diverse rainforest and four of the basin's waterfalls: **Takob Falls**, **Giluk Falls**, **Maliau Falls** and **Ginseng Falls**. Do not attempt the trek unless you are in excellent shape (in fact, Borneo Nature Tours will require a letter from a doctor testifying to your ability to undertake the trek). Your tour operator will supply a guide and porters to carry your food. You'll be in charge of your day pack, camera, leech socks, walking clothes and dry kit for the evening.

A **canopy walkway** stretches near the Basin study centre, and it is pretty astounding to walk its length amid rainforest canopy that has never felt a human cut.

Sleeping

Accommodation in the Maliau is in the form of simple camps, which range from basic bunkhouses to wood-frame two-storey huts with private bedrooms. None of the camps are luxurious, but after a day on the trail fighting leeches, they'll seem like paradise.

There are two ways to get here. **Borneo Nature Tours** (☎088-267637; www.borneonaturetours.com; Lot 10, ground fl, Block D, Kompleks Sadong Jaya) and affiliated agents offer a five-day, four-night all-inclusive tour of the Maliau for RM5220 per person for two to three people (this can go as low as RM4360 per person for a group of 10 to 15). The package is purposefully cost prohibitive to eliminate those who aren't the most diehard nature fans.

The other way is via your own steam and initiative. This method is not anywhere as easy as booking a tour, and it's not dirt cheap either, but it's a bit more affordable.

Information

The Maliau Basin is located in the southern part of central Sabah, just north of the logging road that connects Tawau with Keningau. The basin is part of the Yayasan Sabah Forest Management Area, a vast swath of forest in southeastern Sabah under the management of **Yayasan Sabah** (www.ysnet.org.my), a semigovernmental body tasked with both developing and protecting the natural resources of Sabah.

The **MBCA security gate** is just off the Tawau–Keningau Rd. From the gate, it's a very rough 25km journey to the **Maliau Basin Studies Centre**, for researchers, and about 20km to **Agathis Camp**, the base camp for most visitors to the basin.

Getting There & Away

There is no reliable public transport to the park, so you either need to drive yourself or arrange transport. Borneo Nature Tours will handle all transport if you book through them.

Minibus

Minibuses occasionally ply the route bringing loggers to their camps, but this isn't a regular service and cannot be relied upon.

Self-drive

Although the road here is not paved, there is gravel all along the route, and the basin can even be reached by motorbike. Drive carefully and take some jerry cans of petrol. A small shop at Batu 41, 15km from the park entrance, sells expensive petrol, but we can't guarantee its hours. Once at the security gate to the park, you'll have to take a dirt track to Agathis Camp. Rangers may transfer you if you're worried about driving your car.

Van

If you've prearranged with the Maliau Basin Conservation Area Authority in Tawau, that office may get a minivan to take you to the park entrance for RM650. In the park, rangers can arrange vans to take you back to Tawau or Keningau (closer to KK) for a similar price.

SOUTHWESTERN SABAH

The Crocker Range is the backbone of southwestern Sabah, separating coastal lowlands from the wild tracts of jungle in the east. Honey-tinged beaches scallop the shores from KK down to the border, passing the turbid rivers of the Beaufort Division. Offshore you'll find Pulau Tiga, forever etched in the collective consciousness as the genesis site for the eponymous reality show *Survivor,* and Pulau Labuan, centre of the region's oil industry and the transfer point for ferries heading onto Sarawak and Brunei.

The Interior

Sabah's interior constitutes some of the wildest territory in the state, and the best place for accessing this largely unexplored hinterland is via the southwest part of the state.

The landscape is dominated by the **Crocker Range**, which rises near Tenom in the south and runs north to Mt Kinabalu. The range forms a formidable barrier to the interior of the state and dominates the eastern skyline from Kota Kinabalu down to Sipitang. Once across the Crocker Range, you descend into the green valley of the Sungai Pegalan that runs from Keningau in the south and to Ranau in the north. The heart of the **Pegalan Valley** is the small town of **Tambunan**, around which you'll find a few low-key attractions.

CROCKER RANGE NATIONAL PARK

Much of the Crocker Range has been gazetted as Crocker Range National Park. The main means of accessing this landscape by foot is via the **Salt Trail** (Salt Trails; ☎088-553500; www.sabahparks.org.my/eng/crocker_range_park/salt_trail.asp), a series of four treks that trace the path of traditional trade routes across the mountains. At their shortest the trails can be completed in half a day; the longest route, the **Inobong-Terian-Buayan-Kionop-Tikolod trail**, takes three days to finish (if you're fit!). At the time of writing the tourism infrastructure around the salt trails was quite minimal, making this an excellent adventure for DIY trekkers who want to get off Sabah's package tourism trail. You'll need to get in touch with Crocker Range National Park to organise guides.

Even if you're not trekking, the Crocker Range and Pegalan Valley make a nice jaunt into rural Sabah for those with rental vehicles. As you make your way over the range between KK and Tambunan, you'll be treated to brilliant views back to the South China Sea and onward to Mt Trus Madi.

TAMBUNAN

Nestled among the green curves of the Crocker Hills, Tambunan, a small agricultural service town about 81km from KK, is the first settlement you'll come to in the range. The region was the last stronghold of Mat Salleh, who became a folk hero for rebelling against the British in the late 19th century. Sadly, Salleh later blew his reputation by negotiating a truce, which so outraged his own people that he was forced to flee to the Tambunan plain, where he was eventually killed.

Sights

Tambunan Rafflesia Reserve NATURE RESERVE
(☎088-898500; admission RM5; ⏲8am-3pm)
Near the top of the Crocker Range, next to the main highway 20km from Tambunan, is this park devoted to the world's largest flower. The Rafflesia is a parasitic plant that grows hidden within the stems of jungle vines until it bursts into bloom, at which

point it eerily resembles the monster plant from *Little Shop of Horrors*. The large bulbous flowers can be up to 1m in diameter. The 12 or so species of Rafflesia here are found only in Borneo and Sumatra; several species are unique to Sabah, but as they only bloom for a few days it's hard to predict when you'll be able to see one. Rangers can guide you into the jungle reserve for the day for RM100. Keningau-bound buses will stop here if you ask the driver to let you off, but getting back to Tambunan will require hitching on the highway. A round-trip taxi from Tambunan costs RM100, which includes waiting time.

Sleeping

Tambunan Village Resort Centre RESORT $$
(TVRC; ☎087-774076; http://tvrc.tripod.com; 24 Jln TVRC; r & chalets RM60-110; ❄) The main accommodation game is this quirky resort, located some 2km from the tiny town centre. The staff at the centre can help arrange trips up Mt Trus Madi. If you're driving here from KK, the centre is just south of the Shell station on the main road.

Getting There & Away

BUS & MINIVAN

Regular minivans ply the roads between Tambunan and KK (RM15, 1½ hours), Ranau (RM15, two hours), Keningau (RM10, one hour) and Tenom (RM15, two hours). KK–Tenom express buses also pass through, though you may have to ask them to stop. The minivan shelter is in the middle of Tambunan town. Minivans to KK pass the entrance to the Rafflesia reserve; you'll usually be charged for the whole trip to KK.

MT TRUS MADI

About 20km southeast of Tambunan town is the dramatic **Mt Trus Madi**, Sabah's second-highest peak, rising to 2642m. Although logging concessions encircle the mount, the upper slopes and peak are wild and jungle-clad and classified as forest reserve. Ascents are possible, however it's more challenging than Mt Kinabalu, and more difficult to arrange. Independent trekkers must be well equipped and bring their own provisions up the mountain. It is possible to go by 4WD (RM500) up to about 1500m, from where it is a five- to seven-hour climb to the top. There are places to camp halfway up the mountain and on the summit. Before setting off, you are strongly advised to hire a guide (RM200) or at least get maps and assistance from the Tambunan Village Resort Centre or **Forestry Department** (Jabatan Perhutanan; ☎089-660811, 087-774691) in Tambunan. Bring winter clothes, as it gets cold towards the peak, and be prepared for a long, muddy slog.

You can get here on your own, but it's far easier to organise with a tour company. **Tropical Mountain Holidays** (☎013-545 7643, 013-549 2730; http://www.tropicalmountainholidaysmalaysia.com), based in KK, specializes in Trus Madi ascents. Their 2-day, 1-night climb up the mountain, which includes transfer from KK, runs US$300 per person, which is close to what you'll pay if you hire guides and your own vehicle to get out here.

KENINGAU

If you have a bent for the bucolic, you'll probably want to skip Keningau – this busy service town has a touch of urban sprawl about it, and most visitors only pass through to pick up transport, use an ATM or stock up on supplies. As far as attractions go, you might check out **Taipaek-gung**, a colourful Chinese temple in the middle of town, or the large **tamu** (market) held every Thursday.

For a sleepover, try **Hotel Juta** (☎087-337888; www.sabah.com.my/juta; Lg Milimewa 2; standard/superior d from RM175; ❄), which towers over the busy town centre. It's convenient to transport, banking and shopping needs, and rooms are nicely appointed in the Western-businessman style. There is a restaurant on the premises. Shabbier options include the nearby **Crown Hotel** (☎087-338555; Lg Milimewa; standard/superior d from RM40).

There are eight daily express buses to/from KK (RM15, 2½ hours) and four to/from Tenom (RM8, one hour). These buses stop at the Bumiputra Express stop on the main road across from the Shell station. Minivans and share taxis operate from several places in town, including a stop just north of the express bus stop; they all leave when full. There are services to/from KK (RM44, 2½ hours), Ranau (RM25, three hours) and Tenom (RM10, one hour).

TENOM

This sleepy little town at the southern end of the Crocker Range has seen better days but still manages to be more attractive than traffic-choked Keningau. Tenom was closely involved in uprisings against the British in 1915, led by the famous Murut chief Ontoros Antonom, and there's a **memorial** to the tribe's fallen warriors off the main road. Most people pass through Tenom on

their way to the nearby Sabah Agricultural Park.

If you somehow get stuck in town, spend the night at **Orchid Hotel** (☎087-737600; Jln Tun Mustapha; s/d RM40/50; ❄) Rooms are clean and well kept and good value for money. There are cheaper hotels in the vicinity, but they're all a bit musty.

Minivans operate from the *padang* (field) in front of the Hotel Sri Perdana. Destinations include Keningau (RM10, one hour) and KK (RM42, two to four hours depending on stops). There are also regular services to Tambunan (RM15, two hours). Taxis congregate at a rank on the west side of the *padang*.

SABAH AGRICULTURAL PARK

Heaven on earth for horticulturalists: the vast **Sabah Agricultural Park** (Taman Pertanian Sabah; ☎087-737952; www.sabah.net.my/agripark; adult/child RM25/10; ⏲9am-4.30pm Tue-Sun), about 15km northeast of Tenom, is run by the Department of Agriculture and covers about 6 sq km. Originally set up as an orchid centre, the park has expanded to become a major research facility, tourist attraction and offbeat camp site (RM10), building up superb collections of rare plants such as hoyas, and developing new techniques for use in agriculture, agroforestry and domestic cultivation.

Flower gardens and nature paths abound and a minizoo lets you get up close and personal with some farm animals and deer. Exploring by bicycle would be a good idea, but the fleet of rental bikes here has just about rusted to the point of immobility; if they've replaced them by the time you arrive, rentals cost RM3. There is a free 'train' (it's actually more like a bus) that does a 1½-hour loop of the park, leaving from outside the reception hourly from 9.30am to 3.30pm. If you're truly taken with the park, there's a bare bones on-site **hostel** (dm RM25), which is sometimes taken up by visiting school groups.

Take a minivan from Tenom heading to Lagud Seberang (RM5). Services run throughout the morning, but dry up in the late afternoon. Tell the driver you're going to Taman Pertanian. The park entrance is about 1km off the main road. A taxi from Tenom will cost around RM90.

SAPULOT & BATU PUNGGUL

Perhaps even more so than the Maliau Basin, this is as remote as it gets in Sabah. Not far from the Kalimantan border, **Batu Punggul** is a jungle-topped limestone outcrop riddled with caves, towering nearly 200m above Sungai Sapulot. This is deep in Murut country and the stone formation was one of several sites sacred to these people. Batu Punggul and the adjacent Batu Tinahas are traditionally believed to be longhouses that gradually transformed into stone. The view from the upper reaches of Batu Punggul may be the best in Sabah – in every direction is deep jungle, knifelike limestone outcrops and, if you are lucky, swinging orang-utans. It can be difficult and expensive to get here, but this is a beautiful part of Sabah that few tourists visit, and it offers a chance to rub shoulders with the jungle Murut. It is almost impossible to get out here on your own, as there is virtually no tourism infrastructure and English is almost non-existent, but even the most independent traveller will likely enjoy booking through Orou Sapulot.

TOP CHOICE Orou Sapulot CULTURAL

(☎016-311 0056; www.orousapulot.com/; 3-day/2-night around per person RM750) Orou ('sun' in Murut) Sapulot is an excellent means of accessing the deepest areas of Sabah's interior. Run by Silas Gunting, a descendant of the local Murut who is now a succesful KK businessman, Orou is one of the more innovative eco-tourism projects in the state, and offers what may be the best package tour in Sabah.

The trip encompasses the **Romol Eco Village**, a modern longhouse home stay where visitors live with the Murut; the **Pungiton** ('bat' in Murut) Caves, an extensive cavern system that resembles a bat-shit-laced cheese wheel, complete with rushing underground rivers and enormous underground chambers plucked from a cathedral; an **eco-camp** by Pungiton located on the banks of a heavenly river; a trip to the crystalline **Kabulungou** waterfalls, and finally, a river trip to Batu Pungull, along a chocolate-brown river hemmed in by primary rainforest. You will get the chance to swim in this river, and let us tell you: swimming through virgin jungle is as Edenic as life gets.

All the while, Orou is doing good work. It is common in Sabah for poorer indigenous communities to sell their lands to palm oil and timber companies; the liquid assets they gain are usually spent within a few years. By employing local Murut and encouraging their families to keep their lands

and preserve them for eco-tourism purposes, Orou is trying to stave off the worst ecological and economic impacts of this trend while providing a sustainable income for the communities of Sabah's interior.

The above prices are estimated rates that take in all of the activities mentioned above. To offset costs, Orou prefers groups of travellers, but single travellers or small groups are encouraged as well; you will likely be folded into a larger group. In KK, Sticky Rice and Adventure Alternative Borneo (p311) are Orou Sapulot's preferred booking agencies.

Beaufort Division

This shield-shaped peninsula, popping out from Sabah's southwestern coast, is a marshy plain marked with curling rivers and fringed by golden dunes. Tourists with tight travel schedules should consider doing a wildlife river cruise at Klias or Garama if they don't have time to reach Sungai Kinabatangan. Yes, the Kinabatangan is better, but packs of proboscis monkeys can still be spotted here and it's only a day trip from KK. You can book trips to Beaufort, Weston and the Klias and Garama rivers in any KK travel agency.

BEAUFORT

Born as a timber town, Beaufort has reinvented itself with the proliferation of palm-oil plantations. A suitable pit stop for tourists travelling between Sabah and Sarawak, this sleepy township is the gateway to white-water rapids on the **Sungai Padas** and the monkey-filled Klias and Garama areas. The Sungai Padas divides Beaufort into two sections: the aptly named Old Town with its weathered structures, and New Town, a collection of modern shophouses on flood-phobic stilts.

Sights & Activities

Memorial Stone MEMORIAL

(Jln Tugu) There's a small monument to Private Thomas Leslie Starcevich, an Australian WWII veteran. In 1945, Starcevich single-handedly overwhelmed a Japanese machine-gun position, for which he received the Victoria Cross, the British military's highest decoration. The stone is at the bottom of a small embankment and is marked by brown signs and an arch.

RAFTING

White-water rafting enthusiasts can book a river trip with **Riverbug** (☎088-260501; www.riverbug.asia; Wisma Sabah, Jln Fuad Stephen), the premier operator in the area. Scuba Junkie, which runs a very popular dive centre in Semporna has an affiliated river-rafting outfit here called, appropriately, **River Junkie** (☎019-6012145; www.river-junkie.com; Wisma Sabah, Jln Fuad Stephen), which comes highly recommended by travellers. Day trips organised out of KK cost around RM200 to RM400 per person, depending on what package you choose. The cheapest options involve leisurely boat tours and proboscis monkey spotting; more expensive tours include white-water rafting expeditions and side trips to sites like the Mari Mari Cultural Village (Riverbug also offers a combo paintball day!). All trips include transfers by van, and normally require 24 hours' advance notice. Tourists who seek more serene waters can ride the rapids of Sungai Kiulu (bookable through the aforementioned operators), which is located near Mt Kinabalu and calm enough to be popular with families.

Sleeping

There's really no need to spend the night in Beaufort, but if you must, then try the **MelDe Hotel** (☎087-222266; 9-20 Lo Chung Park, Jln Lo Chung; s/d/ste from RM70/80/90; ❄) The rooms are a bit crusty in the corners, but it's passable for a night's sleep while in transit. Go for a room on one of the upper floors – they have windows. The Chinese restaurant under the inn is very popular with locals. MelDe is located in Old Town. If you're stopping in town for a bite, make sure you try a pomelo (football-sized citrus fruit) and local *mee Beaufort* (Beaufort noodles) – both are locally famous.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Express buses operate from near the old train station at the south end of Jln Masjid (the ticket booth is opposite the station). There are departures at 9am, 1pm, 2.15pm and 5pm for KK (RM10, 1½ hours). There are departures at 9.10am, 10.30am, 1.45pm and 6.20pm for Sipitang (RM5, 1½ hours). The KK to Lawas express bus passes through Beaufort at around 3pm; the trip from Beaufort to Lawas costs RM15 and takes 1¾ hours.

MINIVANS

Minivans operate from a stop across from the mosque, at the north end of Jln Masjid. There are frequent departures for KK (RM10, two hours), and less-frequent departures for Sipitang (RM12, 1½ hours), Lawas (RM15, 1¾ hours) and Kuala Penyu (RM8, until around 2.30pm, one hour). To Menumbok (for Labuan) there are plenty of minivans until early afternoon (RM10, one hour).

TAXIS

Taxis depart from the stand outside the old train station, at the south end of Jln Masjid. Charter rates include: KK (RM70), Kuala Penyu (RM55), Sipitang (RM35), Menumbok (RM50) and Lawas (RM100).

KUALA PENYU

Tiny Kuala Penyu, at the northern tip of the peninsula, is the jumping-off point for Pulau Tiga if you are not accessing 'Survivor Island' via the new boat service from KK. From KK, minivans leave from behind Wawasan Plaza (RM10 to RM15, two hours). From Beaufort minivans to Kuala Penyu (RM10) leave throughout the morning, but return services tail off very early in the afternoon, so you may have to negotiate a taxi or local lift back. A minivan to/from Menumbok costs RM65 per vehicle.

TEMPURUNG

Tempurung Seaside Lodge (☎088-773066; http://www.borneotempurung.com/; 3 Putatan Point; 2-day, 1-night package from RM310), set along the quiet coastal waters of the South China Sea, is a good spot for hermits who seek a pinch of style. The main lodge was originally built as a vacation home, but friends convinced the owners that it would be a crime not to share the lovely property with the world. Rooms are scattered between several chalet-style bungalows accented with patches of jungle thatch. The packages include fantastic meals. Nightly rates are also available.

Borneo Express (☎in KK 012-830 7722, in Limbang 085-211 384, in Miri 012-823 7722) runs buses from KK (departing from Wawasan) at 6.45am, 10am and 12.30pm daily. Ask the driver to let you off at the junction with the large Kuala Penyu sign. The bus will turn left (south) to head towards Menumbok; you want to go right (north) in the direction of Kuala Penyu. If you arranged accommodation in advance, the lodge van can pick you up here (it's too far to walk). Buses pass the junction at 9.30am and 3.30pm heading back to KK. If you're driving, take a right at the junction and keep an eye out for the turn-off on the left side of the road just before Kuala Penyu. We suggest calling the lodge for directions. A charter taxi from Beaufort will cost about RM50.

KLIAS

The tea-brown Sungai Klias looks somewhat similar to the mighty Kinabatangan, offering short-stay visitors a chance to spend an evening in the jungle cavorting with saucy primates. There are several companies offering two-hour river cruises. We recommend Borneo Authentic (p312), the first operator to set up shop in the region. Trips include a large buffet dinner and a short night walk to view the swarms of fireflies that light up the evening sky like Christmas lights. Cruises start at dusk (around 5pm), when the sweltering heat starts to burn off and animals emerge for some post-siesta prowling.

There is no accommodation in Klias, although Borneo Authentic can set you up with one of its comfy rooms at the Tempurung Seaside Lodge nearby. Tourists can make their own way to the row of private jetties 20km west of Beaufort, however, most trip-takers usually sign-up for a hassle-free day trip from KK (which ends up being cheaper since you're sharing transport).

GARAMA

Narrower than the river in Klias, the Sungai Garama is another popular spot for the popular river-cruise day trips from KK. Chances of seeing fireflies are slim, but Garama is just as good as Klias (if not better) when it comes to primate life. Gangs of proboscis monkeys and long-tailed macaques scurry around the surrounding floodplain offering eager tourists plenty of photo fodder.

Like Klias, the tours here start at around 5pm (with KK departures at 2pm), and after a couple of hours along the river, guests chat about the evening's sightings over a buffet dinner before returning to KK. There are several operators offering Garama river tours; we prefer **Only in Borneo** (☎088-260506; www.oibtours.com; package tour RM190), an offshoot of Traverse Tours. It has a facility along the shores of Sungai Garama and offers an overnight option in prim dorms or double rooms.

It is technically possible to reach Garama with one's own vehicle, but the network of unmarked roads can be tricky and frustrating. We recommend leaving early in the morning from KK if you want to get here on your own steam.

WESTON

The little village of Weston – a couple of shacks clustered around a gold-domed mosque – is the jumping-off point for a gentle yet jungly patch of wetlands that is equal parts serene and overgrown. The area was bombed beyond recognition during WWII, but recent conservation efforts have welcomed groups of curious proboscis monkeys into the tidal marshlands, which are shaded by towering nipa palms and copses of spiderlike mangroves. As the tide rolls in and out, entire swaths of jungle are submerged and revealed. Monkeys, monitor lizards, otters and mud skippers flash through the aquatic undergrowth, and as the sun sets, clouds of flying foxes (ie *big* bats) flap in with the darkness.

Sights

Weston Wetland (☎016-813 4300, 013-881 3233; http://westonwetland.blogspot.com/) operates a variety of package tours including river-cruise day trips and sleepovers at its swamp-side longhouse (all-inclusive two-day, one-night package RM250). The dorm facilities are rustic at best, but the quality of the firefly show here is extremely high. Note that the folk at Weston Wetland insist you prebook before visiting.

While you're here, you can ask folk at the lodge to take you to **Che Hwa Schoolhouse**, the oldest wooden school building in Borneo and a fine example of antiquarian Chinese architecture.

MENUMBOK

The tiny hamlet of Menumbok is where you can catch car ferries to the Serasa Ferry Terminal in Muara, 25km northeast of Bandar Seri Begawan (Brunei), and to Pulau Labuan (adult/car RM5/40, departures every hour from 10.30am-3.30pm).

On land, a charter taxi from Beaufort costs RM60, minivans from Kuala Penyu cost RM50 per vehicle. There is a direct bus service connecting Menumbok to KK.

Pulau Tiga National Park

Outwit, outplay and outlast your fellow travellers on what is known throughout the world as 'Survivor Island'. The name Pulau Tiga actually means 'three islands' – the scrubby islet is part of a small chain created during an eruption of mud volcanoes in the late 1890s. Over 100 years later, in 2001, the island had its 15 minutes of fame when it played host to the smash-hit reality TV series *Survivor*. TV junkies still stop by for a look-see, although the 'tribal council' was destroyed in a storm and the debris was cleared after it turned into a home for venomous snakes. Whatever your viewing preferences, it's still a great place for relaxing on the beach, hiking in the forest and taking a cooling dip in burping mud pits at the centre of the island.

Sights & Activities

Pulau Kalampunian Damit ('day-mit,' not 'dammit, I'm on snake island') is little more than a large rock covered in dense vegetation but is famous for the sea snakes that come ashore to mate, hence the island's nickname, **Snake Island**. Sounds like the tourism destination of the 21st century, right? On any one day up to 150 snakes can be present, curled up under boulders, among roots and in tree hollows. It's a fascinating phenomenon, made doubly enigmatic by the fact that the snakes are never seen on nearby Pulau Tiga. Pulau Tiga Resort runs boat trips to the island (RM40 per person), with a stop en route for snorkelling for RM30 extra. You can also dive off the island for RM100 per dive, or RM150 for a fun dive for those with no scuba experience; it's not the best diving in Borneo, but then again, you're in Borneo, so there's plenty of rainbow-coloured fish to peep at.

Sleeping & Eating

Pulau Tiga Resort RESORT $$

(☎088-240584; www.pulau-tiga.com; 2-day, 1-night package from Kuala Penyu per person RM305-360, from KK RM455-510; ❄) Built to house the production crew for the *Survivor* series (Jeff Probst stayed in cabin E), this compound has been turned into a lovely seaside resort. Accommodation is available in dorm-style 'longhouse' rooms (three beds in each), while more luxurious private cabins have double beds and plenty of air-con. The beach-facing grounds offer amazing views of the sunset, while a detailed map is available for those that want to track down the beach where the Pagong Tribe lived (called Pagong Pagong Beach). There's currently only one staff member who was working here when *Survivor* was being filmed, but the most unpopular guest at the resort is still sent to Snake Island after dinner (joke!).

Sabah Parks CAMPING $
(☎088-211881; www.sabahparks.org.my; Lot 1-3, Block K, Kompleks Sinsuran, Jln Tun Fuad Stephens; r from RM75) Sabah Parks runs more basic lodging (ie block houses) on the island for less affluent survivalists. It's right next door to Pulau Tiga Resort, about 10m from where 'Tribal Council' was once held (sadly, tiki torches no longer line the way). Facilities here are limited and there's no restaurant, though a cooking area is provided.

Getting There & Away

Boat

From Kuala Penyu the boat ride takes about 20 minutes. Boats leave at 10am and 3pm. Most visitors to Pulau Tiga come as part of a package, in which case transport is included in the price. You can try showing up in Kuala Penyu and asking if you can board one of the day's boats out to the island (we don't recommend this option as priority is given to resort guests with bookings). For Sabah Parks' lodgings try to hop a ride with the Pulau Tiga Resort boat – chartering your own craft costs RM600 at least.

Pulau Labuan

POP 95,500

If you've ever wondered what a cross between a duty-free airport mall and a tropical island would look like, may we recommend the federal district of Pulau Labuan. Some call this Sabah's version of Vegas, and in the sense that Labuan offers both duty-free sin and tacky family fun, we kinda agree. By the way, everything here *is* duty free, because politically, Labuan is governed directly from KL. As such, a lot of the booze you consume and cigarettes you smoke in Sabah and Sarawak is illegally smuggled from Labuan.

The sultan of Brunei ceded Labuan to the British in 1846 and it remained part of the Empire for 115 years. The only interruption came during WWII, when the Japanese held the island for three years. Significantly, it was on Labuan that the Japanese forces in North Borneo surrendered at the end of the war, and the officers responsible for the death marches from Sandakan were tried here.

Bandar Labuan is the main town and the transit point for ferries linking Kota Kinabalu and Brunei.

Sights & Activities

BANDAR LABUAN

Labuan's main settlement is light on character but has a couple of passable attractions.

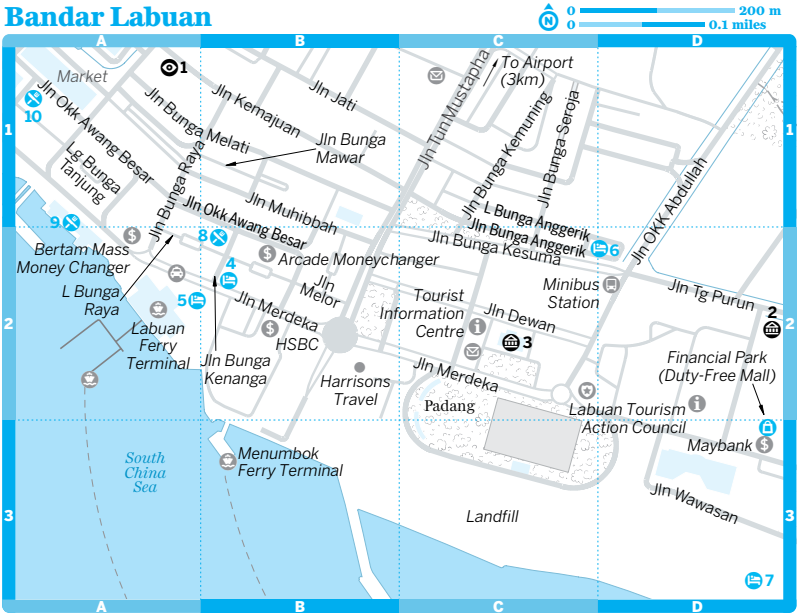
FREE Labuan Museum MUSEUM
(Map p376; ☎414135; 364 Jln Dewan; admission free; ⏲9am-5pm) This museum on Jln Dewan takes a glossy, if slightly superficial, look at the island's history and culture, from colonial days, through WWII, to the establishment of Labuan as an independent federal territory. The most interesting displays are those on the different ethnic groups here, including a diorama of a traditional Chinese tea ceremony (the participants, however, look strangely Western).

FREE Labuan Marine Museum MUSEUM
(Map p376; ☎425927/414462; Jln Tanjung Purun; admission free; ⏲9am-6pm) On the coast just east of the centre, the Labuan International Sea Sports Complex houses a decent little museum with a good shell collection and displays of marine life found in the area. Don't forget to head upstairs where you'll find a 42ft-long skeleton of an Indian fin whale. The real highlight, however, and a guaranteed hit with the kids, is the 'touch pool' opposite reception. This has to be the only shark-petting zoo we've ever seen (fret not: the sharks are less than a metre long).

DIVING

Labuan is famous for its **wreck diving**, with no fewer than four major shipwrecks off the coast (two from WWII and two from the 1980s). The only dive outfit operating here is **Borneo Star Dives** (☎087-429278; stardivers2005@yahoo.com; International Seasports Complex; dive packages from RM438), which does island-hopping tours and can take you out to all four sites. Note that only the 'Cement Wreck' is suitable for novice divers; the 'Blue Water Wreck' (in our opinion, the most impressive of the bunch) requires advanced open-water certification, and the 'American' and 'Australian' wrecks are only recommended for certified wreck divers.

Bandar Labuan



Bandar Labuan

Sights

1 Chinese Temple A1
2 Labuan Marine Museum D2
3 Labuan Museum C2

Sleeping

4 ASV Backpackers B2
5 Grand Dorsett Labuan A2
6 Mariner Hotel D2
7 Waterfront Labuan Financial Hotel D3

Eating

8 Choice Restaurant B2
9 Port View Restaurant A1
10 Restoran Selera Farizah A1

AROUND PULAU LABUAN

WWII Memorial (Labuan War Cemetery) CEMETERY

A dignified expanse of lawn with row upon row of headstones dedicated to the nearly 4000 Commonwealth servicemen, mostly Australian and British, who lost their lives in Borneo during WWII. The cemetery is near the golf course, about 2km east of town along Jln OKK Abdullah. A **Peace Park** on the west of the island at Layang Layangan commemorates the place of Japanese surrender and has a Japanese war memorial.

Labuan Bird Park WILDLIFE RESERVE

(☎463544; adult/child/under 5 RM3/1/free; ⏲10am-5pm, closed Fri) This pretty park offers refuge to a wide range of species in three geodesic domes, and a swath of rainforest – the birds look a little bored, but healthy. The park is located at the north end of the island on Jln Tanjung Kubong.

Chimney LANDMARK

Believed to be part of an old coal-mining station, this is the only historical monument of its kind in Malaysia, and has good views along the coast. It's at the northeast tip of the island, best accessed by minibus or taxi.

Labuan Marine Park PARK

Pulau Kuraman, Pulau Rusukan Kecil and Pulau Rusukan Besar are uninhabited islands lying southwest of Labuan that are now protected by the federal government. The beaches are pristine, but dynamite fishing has destroyed much of the coral. You can hire boats from the jetty at the Labuan International Sea Sports Complex to explore the marine park. A day's charter costs around RM600 per group of six people.

Thanks to financial deregulation Labuan is now the home of some major offshore bank accounts, so you may also want to be on the lookout for men in sunglasses with big briefcases, although we suggest not taking pictures of them.

If you want to dive here, enquire at Borneo Star Dives (p375).

Sleeping

TOP CHOICE Labuan Homestay Programme

HOMESTAY $

(☎422622; www.labuantourism.com; 1/2 days incl full board RM65/140) This excellent service matches visitors with a friendly local in one of three villages around the island: Patau Patau 2, Kampong Sungai Labu and Kampong Bukit Kuda. Some of the homes are just as grand as one of the international-class hotels on the waterfront! If you want to be near Bandar Labuan, ask for accommodation at Patau Patau 2 – it's a charming stilt village out on the bay. Stay a bit longer and learn how to make *ambuyat,* also known as 'gluey sago porridge' and Brunei's favourite dish.

If you want to enroll in the program, book online at least a few days in advance.

Grand Dorsett Labuan

HOTEL $$$

(Map p376; ☎422000; www.granddorsett.com/labuan; 462 Jln Merdeka; r from RM475;) The Grand Dorsett (once a link in the Sheraton chain) has everything you would expect from an international hotel, with five-star rooms, good restaurants and a pub hosting live bands. Weekend rates go down to as low as RM230.

Waterfront Labuan Financial Hotel

HOTEL $$

(Map p376; ☎418111; leslbn@tm.net.my; 1 Jln Wawasan; r RM250-580, ste RM580-2150;) Not just for merchant bankers – this is a large, luxurious leisure hotel which practically feels like a mall, with full facilities and a small marina attached. The rooms are spacious and have a corporate appeal, and some have great sea views. There's a huge outdoor pool and a restaurant.

Mariner Hotel

HOTEL $$

(Map p376; ☎418822; mhlabuan@streamyx.com; 468 Jln Tanjung Purun; r from RM110;) Pitched at the low-end business-class market, this smart block offers good facilities for the price. Rooms come with fridges, laminate floors and neat, spacious bathrooms.

ASV Backpackers

HOSTEL $

(Map p376; ☎413728; asvjau@yahoo.com; Lot U0101, Jln Merdeka; r with shared bathroom RM35;) As backpacker spots go, ASV is in a respectable league – it manages to be cheap while more functionally clean and comfortable than most of the dingy midrangers around town. Shame there's not more, y'know, backpackers in Labuan.

Eating

Choice Restaurant

INDIAN $$

(Map p376; ☎418086; 104 Jln OKK Awang Besar; dishes RM3-10; ⏲8am-10pm) Forget false modesty, the Choice simply proclaims 'We are the best', and this seems to be corroborated by the popularity of the authentic Indian meals with the authentic Indian residents who turn out for *roti,* fish-head curry and *sambal.*

Port View Restaurant

SEAFOOD $$

(Map p376; ☎422999; Jln Merdeka; dishes RM15-30; ⏲lunch & dinner) An outpost of the successful Chinese seafood franchise in KK, this waterfront restaurant has air-con indoor seating and outdoor seating that affords a nice view, over Labuan's busy harbour.

Restoran Selera Farizah

COFFEE SHOP $

(Map p376; Lg Bunga Tanjung; meals from RM3; ⏲8am-10pm) If you prefer a Muslim *kedai kopi,* you could try this place, which serves *roti,* curries and *nasi campur,* accompanied by pro-wrestling videos.

Information

Banks

HSBC (☎087-422610; 189 Jln Merdeka)

Maybank (☎087-443888; Financial Park) ATM.

Tourist Information

Labuan Tourism Action Council (☎087-422622; ground fl, Labuan International Sea Sports Complex; ⏲8am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) Located about 1km east of the town centre, this is the most useful information office in town. It stocks the excellent *Fly Drive Labuan Island & Town Map of Labuan.*

Tourist Information Centre (☎087-423445; www.labuantourism.com.my; cnr Jln Dewan & Jln Berjaya; ⏲8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat) Tourism Malaysia office. Less useful than Labuan Tourism Action Council.

Harrisons Travel (☎087-408096; www.harrisonstravel.com.my; 1 Jln Merdeka) Handy and reputable travel agency.

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GETTING TO BRUNEI: BANDAR LABUAN TO BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN

Getting to the border Ferries to Brunei depart Bandar Labuan daily at 1:30pm, arriving in Brunei's Serasa Ferry Terminal about an hour later. The entire trip for an adult/child costs RM60/38. Aim to show up at the ferry terminal around 12.30pm.

At the border Most visitors are granted a visa on arrival for free, although Australians must pay a fee (see p471 for more information).

Moving on The Serasa Ferry Terminal is 20km northeast of BSB. From here, shuttles can take you to central Bandar Seri Begawan for B$2 (40 minutes). The terminal is linked by ferry with Pulau Labuan, from where boats go to Menumbok in Sabah.

See p465 for details on doing the trip in the opposite direction.

Getting There & Away

Air

Malaysia Airlines (☎1300-883000; www.malaysiaairlines.com.my) has flights to/from KK (45 minutes) and KL (2½ hours), which are usually booked full of oil prospectors. **AirAsia** (☎480401; www.airasia.com) currently flies to KL only.

Boat

Kota Kinabalu Passenger ferries (1st/economy class RM41/31, 3¼ hours) depart KK for Labuan from Monday to Saturday at 8am, and 1:30pm (3pm Sundays). In the opposite direction, they depart Labuan for KK from Monday to Saturday at 8am and 1pm, and 10:30am and 3pm on Sundays.

Sarawak There are daily speedboats to Limbang (2 hours, RM31) and Lawas (2 hours, 15 minutes, RM34) in Sarawak's Limbang Division.

Getting Around

Minibus

Labuan has a good minibus network. Minibuses leave regularly, albeit more frequently before sunset, from the parking lot off Jln Tun Mustapha. Fares range from 50 sen for a short trip to RM2.50 for a trip to the top of the island.

Taxi

Taxis are plentiful and there's a stand opposite the local ferry terminal. The base rate is RM10 for short journeys, with most destinations costing around RM15.

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